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Allegiances

CATS OUTSIDE OF CLANS

Rose - *golden she-cat with icy blue eyes.*

Flint - *gray tom with yellow eyes.*

Stripes - *dark tabby with icy blue eyes.*

Stream - *light, ash gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.*

Snowy - *white tom with amber eyes.*

BLOODCLAN

Leader:

Scourge - *small black tom with one white paw and blue eyes.*

Deputy:

Bone - *white tom with black spots.*

Members:

Thistle - *dark tom with spiky fur and tufted ears.*

Aurora - *brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.*

Duke - *dusky brown tom with white underfur, along with amber eyes.*

Sky - *creamy tabby she-cat with green eyes.*

Disclaimer: I do not own Warriors. The author of Warriors is Erin Hunter. This is a fanfiction.

Credit: @potatoplaytime for drawings/pictures throughout the story.

Prologue

Monsters roared by on the Thunderpath, causing an acrid stench. Smog hung over the city. Twolegs walked by on the sidewalk, their hard paws clacking on the hard cement.

Darken sat atop the dumpster of the dimly lit alley, his gaze cast downward. He flicked his torn ear, sighing quietly. His belly rumbled and ached in hunger. *I guess I should find something to eat. There has to be something...*

He leaped swiftly down from the dumpster and gazed around. All of a sudden, he detected movement - a rattle of one of the trashcans against the wall of the alley. Immediately, Darken scented the air. *Rat!*

Cautiously, he lowered himself, pressing his belly to the cold concrete ground. Careful not to alert the unsuspecting rat, Darken padded forth slowly. The critter scurried out from behind the trashcan, metal clashing on metal as the two trashcans bumped against each other. *Did it see me?* Darken caught a glimpse of the rat's glowing eyes in the darkness. The rat took off. *You're not escaping!*

He darted forward, slamming his paws on the rat's body, pinning it. He trapped it under his grasp. *Got you...*

The rat was dazed, not dead yet, and it squirmed, desperately trying to escape. He nipped its neck, killing it instantly. Darken picked up the rat in his jaws and its limp body dangled as he padded back over to the dumpster, leaping on it again. He settled down, placing the rat in front of him before beginning to eat. *I haven't had rat in a while.* Darken thought to himself, then grimaced. *It's so much better than eating trash from the dumpster.*

Darken finished his meal and tossed the remains of bones aside, then sat silently.

In boredom, his tail swayed slowly. *It gets lonely here...*

Chapter One

[image]

A small black tabby was sitting atop the fence in his yard, his gaze scanning across the forest before him. The soft breeze blew, ruffling his fur. His tail swaying slowly in content, he inhaled the fresh air, then exhaled. *I wonder what life's like beyond this fence...*

Stripes had never caught a single mouse before, just the hard dry pellets his owner fed him, and the occasional tuna dish. *I should explore the forest one day.*

He leaped down from the white picket fence and strode across the grassy yard, the bell on his dark blue collar jingling as he did. The sunlight beamed upon his dark pelt. Emerging through the kitty flap in the door, he returned into his home. Stripes parted his jaws, yawning. He padded over to his food and water bowl, taking a few bites, chewing and swallowing. *What could mouse taste like? Is it better than this?*

Stripes lapped at the water in his bowl and then joined his sister, Stream who was curled up on the rug. "Hey Stream," he mewed as he approached. Stream's eyes opened, she rose to her paws and stretched. "Hello Stripes."

Stream was Stripes's sister, a light gray tabby who wore a green collar.

"Hey, have you ever wondered what's in the forest?" Stripes asked. He had always wanted to know.

Stream glanced at him while grooming her pelt. "Well, not really. We have all we need here, food, water, and a home. I don't care what's in the forest. Probably other homes."

Stripes shrugged. "I suppose you're right. I just can't help but wonder... I'm curious."

"It never mattered to me," Stream sat, wrapping her tail over her paws.

Stripes padded away. He approached the window, leaping up onto the windowsill. He gazed outside. *It's getting dark, and I'm tired.*

He leaped back down and made his way to his bed. Stripes circled it, then lay, curling up. Soon, he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Two

Dawn light filtered through the windows of the house. Stripes's eyes opened and he rose to his paws. He yawned and stretched his limbs before padding to his food and water bowl. He ate a bit, then lapped some water. Rose and Flint, his parents, stood by their bowls as well.

I should visit Snowy. Maybe he's interested in what's in the forest?

Stripes padded off towards the door and went through the flap. He was greeted by warm, fresh air. Stripes made his way across his yard and leaped on the fence, then down, swiftly, on the other side; Snowy's yard.

Snowy, a white tom, was Stripes's best friend who lived in the home next to him. "Hello Stripes!" Snowy greeted. "How are you?"

Stripes looked up. The fluffy white tom was laying, basking in the sun. He returned a smile and mewed, "Good." He padded over and sat by the tom, who sat up as well.

"What brings you here?" Snowy asked. He licked his paw and drew it over his ear.

"Have you ever wanted to go to the forest?" Stripes mewed in question.

Snowy stopped grooming his pelt and looked at the tabby, his amber eyes dark. "No. Haven't you heard of what's out there?"

Stripes was immediately intrigued. "What?"

"Wild cats are out there. They live in '*Clans*' as they call them. They attack cats like us who go on their land." The tom explained.

"Really?! Wild cats?" Stripes tilted his head.

"Yes. I wouldn't go out there..." Snowy advised, gazing at his tabby

friend.

Stripes glanced at the forest. It didn't seem so dangerous, but if what Snowy said was true, it surely was. "I never knew about that. Have you actually seen one of these... wild cats?"

"Yes. They came at me - four of them. I *barely* escaped. I leaped over the fence into my yard, and they stopped chasing me."

"Wow," Stripes's eyes widened. "I wouldn't want to go into the forest, then."

Snowy nodded in agreement. "You shouldn't, or you'll regret it."

"Okay. See you later, then, Snowy." Stripes meowed, dipping his head in farewell. He turned to pad away.

"Bye, Stripes."

Stripes leaped over the fence and padded to the center of his own yard. The sun, high in the sky, brightly shone. *It's getting hot out.*

Deciding to go back inside, he went through the kitty flap, the much cooler air hitting him. *I must tell the others about the wild cats.*

"Stream!" He spotted her and bounded over. His sister was sitting on the couch, their parents beside her.

The light tabby looked at him. "What is it?" Rose and Flint also looked.

"I talked to Snowy. He said wild cats live out there. They live in Clans. Four of them attacked him once, he told me!" Stripes said.

"Wow. Well, that's another reason not to go in the forest. Why are you so interested in it anyway?" Stream replied.

"Don't you think it's a little far-fetched?" Rose put in. "Wild cats, living in.. *Clans*."

"Snowy wouldn't lie. He's trustworthy." Stripes argued.

Flint interjected, "You don't want to go out there, do you?"

"Of course not," Stripes mewed, kneading the carpet floor. "but, I mean, I thought... it would be... I wanted to before. Before Snowy told me what's out there."

"Why would you?" Rose asked. "Do you not like it here?"

"I do; it's not that. I'm just, I was curious is all."

"Well, don't let curiosity get the best of you, Stripes. I doubt what your friend says is true, but don't." Flint said.

Stripes nodded, thinking to himself, *I know he's telling the truth!*

He sighed, and turned away. *I feel like no one trusts me or... understands. Haven't they once wondered what's out there? Surely they have.*

Stripes, with his head down, padded off and leaped onto the windowsill, where he often liked to stay. He tucked his paws under his chest and thought.

I'm sure if I admitted it to my family they'd claw my ears off, but it's just boring as a house cat! There's nothing to do but play with yarn and sleep and eat all day.

Stripes never really bonded much with his family; they didn't take much interest in him, but they cared about him. Well, they all didn't really have much in common, especially him and his sister.

They sharply contrasted. Stream enjoyed her life as a house cat greatly and didn't mind. Rarely went outside... hated the idea of living in a forest. Didn't care about what he thought most of the time.

Though they had their differences, Stripes still cared about his sister and family. They were important to him. But he didn't know what to do. Resting his head on his paws, he gazed outside, his tail swaying slowly. It was boring.

Chapter Three

Stripes had fallen asleep on the windowsill. His eyes blinked open, and immediately sunlight shining through the window blinded him temporarily. He heard his sister call from below, "Stripes? Why did you sleep on the windowsill?"

He got to his paws and stretched, turning and looking at Stream. "I was laying there last night. I must have fell asleep."

"Why? Dreaming of going out *there*, to the forest?" She narrowed her eyes.

"*No*," Stripes replied. "I was just looking at the yard."

"Okay..." Stream was still looking at him. "You never answered my question yesterday, either. Why are you so interested in the forest?"

He sighed. "Haven't you once, just once, thought of what's out there?"

"I already told you. No. So answer my question now." Stream said.

Stripes leaped down from the windowsill. "Why do you want to know so badly?"

"...What if you went out there?"

"I won't! Certainly not after what Snowy told me about the wild cats!" Stripes snapped. "Do you not trust me?"

Stream just shrugged. "Look, I'm *curious* as to why you are interested in the forest. Why won't you just tell me? Is there something you're hiding? You were curious about the forest, so now I'm curious about why."

"Fine... it's just boring here." Stripes admitted, glaring at her.

"Boring! Really? How could you think that?" Stream gasped.

"Well, there's not much to do. Don't worry, I'm not going though."

Stream was staring at Stripes like he was mouse-brained.

"What? I mean, all we can do is eat, sleep, and play with toys," Stripes said, shrugging, "but I'll never leave. I couldn't leave my family."

Stream sighed, and her eyes softened. "I enjoy it here, and what could be so great about a forest? Honestly, it'd be the same. Except without toys. Maybe even food and water."

"That's true," Stripes nodded. "but mice... we've never eaten freshly killed prey before."

"We have perfectly good food, and that's that," Stream replied. "Thinking of food, let's eat."

Stream turned away, and padded off towards their bowls. Stripes stood momentarily, before following after her. He approached his bowl and lapped at the water in it. Then, he took a few bites of the hard dry pellets of food in the other. Stream was eating.

Stripes finished his meal and walked away, headed for the flap in the door.

"Where are you going?" Rose asked, her eyes holding uncertainty.

Stripes whipped around. "You don't have to watch over me like I'm a little kit! Can I not go in the yard?"

Rose, Flint, and Stream were all glaring at him. Stripes had been a bit irritated over the dispute with Stream, and the fact she didn't really trust him either. His whole family didn't trust him! Stripes felt his fur heat up in embarrassment.

"I just wanted to go into the yard," Stripes sighed.

"I only wanted to know, Stripes. You don't have to snap at me," Rose replied.

"You never asked that before," Stripes pointed out.

"Well, it wouldn't surprise me if you were wandering off to the forest," Rose said. "after all, that's all you've been talking about."

Stripes gazed at his mother, then Stream, and finally Flint. He sighed under his breath and spoke.

"I'm not leaving our home. I never will."

And with that, Stripes went outside, padding across the yard before leaping onto the fence. Once again, he looked off at the horizon, and the forest before him, inhaling the fresh air. Stripes shut his eyes. The forest still interested him...

Wild cats? What were they like? What if they were just defending land?

Chapter Four

Stripes was sick of his family always accusing him, always flashing him looks of distrust, and never believing his words. Especially Stream. Of course, he'd always love his family, and he did, but he was annoyed. They didn't even believe what Snowy had said. Stripes let out a sigh, and rested his head on his paws as he lay in his yard, his fur heated by the sunlight's beam. He found it a bit hard to believe they weren't in the slightest, just a bit interested in what lay beyond the fence.

And how every single time he exited the house through the kitty flap, they glared at him, murmuring words with each other. How they never really paid much attention to him, always doing their own thing, never talking to him, ignoring him...

Stripes felt out of place. *As I said before, I do deeply care about them. But sometimes I feel they think I'm just an annoying furball, too curious for my own good.*

The dark tabby got to his paws, gazing up at the clear blue sky; only a few puffy clouds were above, here and there.

He thought of visiting Snowy again when a scent filled the air, that of another cat. Stripes, alarmed, quickly realized the scent was unfamiliar. Upon scenting the air again, he determined that the cat was a tom, and he was nearby. Fear pulsed through him, and at the same time, exhilaration.

Stripes lowered, cautiously gazing around, all senses alert. The scent was growing stronger, and then, *another* scent. Another tom was coming, too.

Wild cats?!

Full of tension, Stripes remained still. "Hello...?" he prompted, rising to a stand. *I shouldn't be afraid!*

The air was silent until it was broken by a mutter, a tom's voice. He seemed to be conversing with another cat. Stripes leaped onto the fence; his bell jingled. He looked down.

One was black and white. The other was black with a white paw, and around his neck was a purple collar with teeth on it. Stripes shivered. How did he get *teeth*? Did he kill animals for those teeth? Upon further inspection, he noticed they were cat and dog teeth. The tabby felt his blood turn to ice. Was this cat a murderer? Stripes, terrified, was about to leap back down into his yard. Then he realized.

Fear shot through him. *They must be the mean, wild cats Snowy told me about!*

I have to get out of here!

Then the black one with the white paw caught a glimpse of Stripes, and he froze with fear. "Hello," he greeted, his tail giving a sway.

The other dipped his head in greeting. They didn't seem mean.

Stripes leaped down, knowing that he was taking a huge risk.

"Who are you...?" the tabby mewed.

"I'm Scourge, and this is Bone," the tom replied, "and you are?"

"Stripes.. is my name," he answered, "are you wild cats?"

"..Wild?" Scourge narrowed his eyes. "No."

Stripes glared at them, trying to keep his fur flat, but to no avail.

Scourge noticed, and added, "You must be referring to the Clan cats. They live in this forest," the tom motioned with his tail. "We are not Clan cats. We've adopted some of their ways... by creating a Clan of our own. But we do not go by their beliefs or rules." He narrowed his eyes. "What makes you think that?"

I knew Snowy was telling the truth! He was right! Tension in the air, Stripes fidgeted with his paws, kneading at the grass. "Well, Sno-

my friend, told me about the wild cats, who live in Clans... I figured, that maybe, you might be..."

"No," Scourge intervened, "we aren't.. wild cats." His tail twitched, and he glanced at Bone.

"We're looking for recruits for our own Clan," Bone explained.

"Recruits..?" Stripes tilted his head.

"Yes. Cats willing to join our Clan, BloodClan. Together, we will take over the forest, and it will be our own territory. All of it." Scourge put in.

"W-What? You want to take over the forest?" Stripes's eyes widened. "Why?"

Scourge went on to further explain, "Yes, the Clan cats are vicious." A growl rose in the tom's throat as he continued, "As a kit, my life was harsh. My siblings were so mean to me. They taunted me. I left and went out to the forest, and that's when they attacked me. I was just a kit."

"I see..." Stripes sighed. "That's not nice of them. They do seem evil." He looked up.

"They are, and that's why we're taking over their precious territory. BloodClan will be victorious!"

Stripes nodded slowly, and then asked, "Were you ever.. curious about the forest?"

"I always was... It was my dream to explore it, to find these Clan cats. But when I did, they nearly killed me."

"That's so terrible!" Stripes said. "I've always wondered what was out there, but my family doesn't."

"Come with us, kit, and I will teach you to fight and hunt. Together we can build BloodClan, and take down those Clan cats," Scourge gave a smile, his sharp white teeth showing.

Now Stripes's heart pumped, all sorts of emotions running through his mind - shock, fear... and most of all, a sense of purpose to do something exciting. Thrill-seeking. *I promised I'd stay with my family forever!* Stripes glanced back at his home, thinking for a few moments. *And I will stay... after I defeat these evil cats! It's what's right!*

Exhilaration pulsed through every inch of his small body as he looked back to Scourge and Bone, and gave a brief nod. "Okay..." After a small pause, he added, "I will help you!"

"First, rid of your kittypet name. From now on, you will be known as Darken of BloodClan," Scourge stated.

I have to change my name? I like the name Darken though! Plus, it will be temporary. It will be no time till I'm back at home as Stripes again.

"Now, we will go to our camp. BloodClan resides in the city. We have many recruits so far."

Stripes... no, now Darken, looked back at his home again, sighing. Then he closed his eyes. *I'm doing what is right. I know my family will be proud of me... I can't tell them, or else they'd never let me go. And I know, they'll worry... but... it must be done. For the good of my neighborhood and the forest!*

"Come Darken," Scourge lashed his tail. He padded off with Bone at his side. They had already started walking off! Darken followed after, and looked back one more time. *I'll miss you.*

Snowy! I completely forgot! It's okay, I'll be back. I'll have so much to tell him. Goodbye!

Darken looked forward and kept ambling after the two toms, breathing in. *For the first time in a long time, I'm excited!*

As many thoughts rushed through his head, the black tabby smiled.

Chapter Five

[image]

"What's a city like?" Darken questioned as the three cats padded forth. "Lots of humans, cars, alleys, roads..." Scourge replied, "it's nothing like what you're used to."

"What are alleys.. and roads?" Darken asked again, confused.

"Alleys are spaces between buildings. Usually where cats stay. BloodClan stays in an alley. Roads are what cars drive on," this time, Bone answered.

"Buildings?"

"You sure have a lot to learn, kit. Buildings, basically... houses. But much bigger," Bone said.

"Oh. I see," Darken nodded, and then fell in beside Bone, so that all were walking in a line, "so, exactly, how many cats do you have... recruited?"

"You'll see," Bone kept looking forward.

"And, where is the city... Near, far..?" Darken tilted his head.

"You'll find out soon enough," Bone said again, "everything will be taught and explained to you once we arrive. There's plenty of time."

Darken nodded, and from then on, didn't speak much. As their journey progressed, things began to look more and more unfamiliar to Darken. At one point, they approached a hill, and stopped. Darken was amazed. An entire world he'd never seen! It was *huge*! Astounded, Darken looked to Bone and Scourge. "We're here?!"

"Not yet," Scourge said, "that's where we're going. We must enter the city and go in the alley. Beware of any humans around. They might try to... take you. Maybe dogs will be around. You never

know."

His heartbeat quickened, and he gulped, looking out at the city. Then he shook his head slightly. *No, I've got to be brave. It's ridiculous that I'm scared!*

Darken gazed off at the city in the distance, reminded of countless times he thought how big the world really was, and what was beyond his home. Now, he was finally able to explore, and have a purpose; his purpose was to fight for a right cause and help BloodClan.

"Let's go," Scourge began skidding down the hill, and Bone followed. After them, Darken skidded down last. The trio padded forward, nearly reaching their destination - the city. A place Darken had never been, let alone heard of. What stories he'd have to tell to his family and Snowy. He would finally prove that life outside their home was thrilling and not boring, unlike laying around all day. This was a chance and something to fulfill his destiny.

Darken followed them to a fence; it wasn't like any he'd seen. It was metal. "Here, go under," Scourge instructed, and lowered his frame against the ground and, with ease, slid under and out on the other side.

Bone lowered, and tried to do the same, and with a grunt said, "Easy for you! You're so small." With effort, the tom slid under, too. Scourge cuffed him on the ear. Amused, Darken slid under the fence. Then a scent hit his senses, one quite foul. It was pungent and acrid. "What is that awful smell?"

"Smog, exhaust, pollution," Scourge said. Darken understood none of it. As if the black tom read his mind, he muttered, "what humans do. Keep in mind, there are plenty of them here..."

Scourge padded forth, Bone and Darken following as they entered the city. They ran along the sidewalk, humans walking by. A human kit shouted, "Oh look mommy! Kitties! Can I have one, please, please, please?!" They raced past the human kit, and soon, left earshot of her. *I'm about to experience what life is like to not have a human. I guess I'm finally free for a while.*

Scourge swerved and took a right, entering an alley, Darken presumed. *Spaces between buildings. Seems about right.* Bone did the same, and then Darken. The next sight shocked the black tabby - cats everywhere, some wearing collars adorned with teeth. All of them, at once, began murmuring to each other. Scourge interrupted with a yowl, "Cats of BloodClan! I managed to recruit one cat, one named Darken." He nudged the tom forward, showing him to all of the cats.

The cats cheered in triumph. Scourge announced again, "One more cat on our side to defeat the Clan cats!" Scourge ambled forward, further into the alley. Every cat gathered as he leaped onto a dumpster and gazed at all of them. Bone followed and leaped onto the dumpster as well, sitting beside him.

"Darken, come forth," Scourge ordered. The tom padded over and approached the dumpster, looking up at Scourge and Bone. "Now leap up here." Darken did as told, and leaped up onto the dumpster beside them. Scourge instantaneously struck his collar, tearing the bell off of it. The bell was sent flying and landed on the concrete ground. Darken did not expect it and, surprised, his ears went flat. "You do not need that bell," Scourge said, "you no longer have your humans and the jingling bell will alert any prey around. And prey is scarce in the city. It's very rare you get an edible, half-decent meal in the dumpster. Let alone a good rat." Darken's eyes were still wide, but he gave a nod. "Now, swear allegiance to BloodClan. Promise you will fight for us at all costs and defend us."

"I will," Darken stated, not breaking eye contact with Scourge. Excitement pulsed at his paws. All of these BloodClan cats, including him, would be fighting for a common goal - and that goal was to teach these Clan cats in the forest that they had no right to nearly kill a kit! These Clan cats were certainly evil, and Darken was proud to join BloodClan. "I am your leader, Darken," Scourge said, "and Bone is your deputy. Everyone else are members of BloodClan and have sworn the same allegiance as you. We all will fight in battle against the Clan cats and take over the forest as our own territory! Those cats do not deserve to live there." Cats of BloodClan cheered as Scourge added, "They should try living in an alley!" Yowls of agreement rose up in the crowd of cats. Darken

joined in. This was the most compelling, enthralling experience in Darken's life. He couldn't wait to get home and tell his family and Snowy all about it.

Chapter Six

Darken had fallen asleep on the cold, concrete ground of the alley; he had to admit, sleeping in his home was much more comfortable. As he got to his paws, Darken stretched his limbs and looked around. Most cats were already awake and training - they were fighting. The tom observed the movements of these cats. *Wow, they're definitely good at battling.* He continued to watch them when he felt his stomach rumble in hunger, and decided he needed some food. *I've never hunted. I need to learn.*

Darken was used to waking up and being able to eat when he pleased, but this was different, and now he needed to get accustomed to it. He'd have to earn food. The black tabby started to pad towards the dumpster when Bone approached him. Startled, Darken looked at the black and white tom. "Oh, hello Bone."

"You need a cat to train with, Darken. Here's Thistle," Bone said. A dark tom with yellow eyes emerged from behind Bone; around his neck was a red collar, and he had spiky fur. Bone glanced at them briefly, before dismissively flicking his tail, and he turned and padded off. Darken looked at the tom. "You're Thistle?"

"Yes. Welcome to BloodClan," he said, "Your name is Darken?" Darken nodded, and put in, "Formerly Stripes, but Scourge changed my name." Thistle gave a curt nod, before saying, "I guess you were a kittypet, then?"

"I was," Darken replied. He'd never heard of the term 'kittypet' before meeting Scourge and Bone, but he guessed it meant cats that were cared for by humans. Thistle sat, wrapping his tail over his paws, "I was a loner before. In case you don't know, it's a cat that belongs to no human or Clan," After a moment's pause, he asked, "Do you believe in StarClan, Darken?"

"StarClan..? What's that?"

"You obviously don't then, and that's good," Thistle said, "it's a thing

the Clan cats believe in, something about 'dead cats that guide them.' Scourge would banish you if you believed in StarClan; he thinks it's nonsense."

"Oh. That's strange... dead cats that guide them..?"

"Yes, they believe the cats will watch over them during the battle when we make our attack. The most ridiculous belief they have is that leaders get nine lives! Now tell me that's not nonsense."

"Sounds like it," Darken said.

"It is," Thistle's tail swayed, "now, we should get training. Have you any experience? I assume you don't."

"No, I don't, but you'll teach me, won't you?" Darken asked.

"Yes, you must be taught to fight the Clan cats," Thistle said, "or else, you'll be killed." Darken nodded, not admitting that he was a bit scared. *I shouldn't be, and I won't be. At the time of battle, I'll be ready and brave.*

"Show me what you've got," Thistle said, and stood, awaiting Darken's attack. The black tabby dipped his head, and lowered into a crouch, gazing intently at Thistle for a few moments, before leaping out. Thistle immediately swerved and Darken landed on the ground, skidding. He shook out his pelt before getting up and turning, looking at the dark tom, his yellow eyes aglow. Thistle shook his head, "You can't wait. You let me, your opponent, know you were going to leap because you were crouching for too long. It was obvious. That way, I was ready to dodge with ease," Instantly after saying that, he sprang forth, slamming into Darken. He pinned him down and dug his claws in his shoulders. Darken shrieked and struggled in the grip, clawing at Thistle. The tom let go and stood, "See? I didn't give you a chance. If you want to fight well, be quick. That is important to remember when fighting. Be swift with your movements."

"Okay," Darken nodded, and realized that did make sense. He had definitely waited too long. "Also, don't be repetitive with attacks. If you leap at the opponent the entire time, they will realize that's all

you do and figure out how to dodge and have an advantage over you in battle. Have different attacks, like sliding under and clawing their belly," Thistle said, "the key is not letting them predict your move. During the battle with the Clan cats, show them no mercy. Now, retry." Thistle stood still, waiting.

Darken ran towards Thistle, but at the last moment turned and struck his side, then bit down on his tail, holding down. The dark tom thrashed, making it difficult for Darken to remain attached. When he didn't let go, Thistle whipped around quickly and struck Darken's shoulder, making him release. Before Darken had time to get to his paws, he lashed out with his claws and hit his muzzle, then swiped his chest. Darken stood, glaring warily at Thistle. Using the attack he had suggested prior, the black tabby slid under him, raking at his belly, causing a painful attack. *Underbellies are sensitive to pain.*

Unexpectedly, Thistle dropped and crushed Darken, and he was unable to move. The tom didn't press with all of his weight, but if he had, it would have made breathing hard. Thistle lifted and leaped away. Darken stood again, his fur bristled. "I didn't expect that."

"Like I said, the key is to not let the opponent expect anything," Thistle reminded him.

"Right," Darken nodded. After a pause, he admitted, "I'm a bit hungry. Is there anything to eat?"

"As Scourge said, rats if you're lucky, and the remains of food found in the dumpster as an average meal. Humans dump their unwanted things in the dumpster. Honestly, they must have lots of food if they throw edible food out," Thistle sat and began to groom his pelt.

"They do. The food is plentiful when you're a kittypet; you may eat whenever you please," Darken explained.

"Must be nice," Thistle remarked, "but I would never choose to be a kittypet. They're pampered and haven't a clue what it's like to be hungry. It's a soft and boring life."

Darken had to agree with part of what Thistle said, but remained silent. Of course, he would return to being a kittypet after the battle, but it was soft and boring. He sighed, finally admitting, "I haven't caught any prey before."

"Oh, that makes sense. After all, you were a kittypet. I'll teach you I suppose. Scent the air, and if you smell any prey, follow the trail of scent cautiously so you don't scare it. Then, crouch when you're close enough, and leap. Either claw, trap, or bite it to kill it."

"Thanks, I'll try to do that if I scent any rat," Darken said, and then dipped his head in farewell, padding away. He scented around, but didn't pick up anything but other cats. *I guess I'll figure out soon enough what rat smells like.* Leaping on a dumpster, he wondered how to open it. He saw that the dumpster was divided down the middle, and opened up one side. *That's how.* Digging around, his nose wrinkled in disgust. *It's nothing like food at home! And I dreamed of trying mouse, thinking that I had it bad for eating those hard dry pellets!*

Darken cringed while looking through all the things in the dumpster; some things weren't even food. He found a half-eaten chicken bone and got it out, setting it in front of his paws after closing the dumpster lid. *Doesn't look appetizing, but better than nothing.* He lowered his head and took a bite. *Yuck, it's all slimy.* Darken finished it, but it wasn't much. Though it did suppress his hunger slightly, he couldn't find much of anything else. He leaped down from the dumpster, back onto the hard ground. Thirsty, Darken looked around. How would he get water? After a few moments of observance, he noticed a small puddle in the alley and padded over to it. He lowered his head and lapped at the water, which was lukewarm.

His thirst relinquished, Darken sat, gazing at his reflection in the water, feeling a bit homesick. He missed his family. Closing his eyes, he thought, *It'll be fine. I'll see them again.*

Chapter Seven

Darken awoke the next morning and rose to his paws. *Sleeping like this will take some getting used to.* His eyes bleary, he groomed and straightened his ragged pelt. *What if a dog came into the alley?* He shook away the thoughts and stretched his limbs, immediately noticing that his legs were very sore, from the training, he knew. Darken never had to fight before. He silently agreed that he had a lot to learn. He was hungrier too, and perhaps he would finally catch a rat - he sure hoped so. Darken knew he had to if he were to survive, but he definitely did not want to eat anything from the dumpster again. *Some cats starve, so I certainly am lucky though.*

The tom scented the air, and once again, nothing but the smell of other cats filled the air. Sighing, he sat back down, looking around at the crowd of BloodClan cats training. He tried to spot Thistle, but didn't see him. *I might have some time to try and hunt then.* Darken got to his paws again and padded away, towards the other side of the alley, scenting the air. Here and there he would catch a whiff of the dumpster, but mostly, cats. When he reached the other side, Darken drew in the air and there was definitely *something* he scented; it was distinct. He followed the scent trail. Maybe this scent was that of a rat. Excited, he recalled what Thistle had said. Darken lowered his body, pressing his paws to the cold ground, remembering to keep silent. He continued to pad forth, and then heard a patter. Glowing eyes were revealed in the shadows, and the black tabby held in a gasp; it was a rat. Darken's claws instinctively unsheathed and he stared at the creature. It was not alerted, so he knew the rat didn't detect him. He knew that this was a rare occurrence, a rat in the alley, so nervously the tom prepared himself to leap.

Darken was tense as the critter walked slowly, sniffing, as if searching for food. The rat was doing the same thing he was, Darken realized - seeking for a meal. The black tabby noticed it was walking further away, and he needed to leap right then. Darken sprang, his hindpaws kicking off the concrete as he landed right in

front of the rat, his paws trapping it. It scrambled, panicking as it tried to escape. Alarmed, Darken realized he didn't press his paws with enough force, and the rat scurried from his grip. Nearly escaping, it was a few tail lengths away before Darken attempted to catch it again, this time succeeding as he instantly nipped its neck. It was killed at once. Satisfied, Darken picked up the rat in his jaws and carried it back to the spot he slept. *This is the first time I've ever caught any prey!* He looked up, trying to find Thistle again. Darken wanted to show him so that he knew he could hunt.

Cats gave him glances, and looked at the rat he had. Darken pitied them; they were probably very hungry. Among the cats, Darken saw Thistle coming his way. "Darken," he said, approaching, "I've been looking for you." When he had stopped walking and stood in front of Darken, he noticed the rat he had. "You caught that?"

"Yes," Darken answered, "it nearly escaped though. I remembered what you taught me."

"Well, that's great," Thistle nodded approval, "you caught something on your first try."

"Thanks," the rat was rather plump, so to be kind, Darken offered, "want to share?" Thistle nodded, and murmured a thanks as he took a bite, savoring the taste of the prey, much better compared to eating trash. Darken also took a bite, surprised; the rat tasted so much better than the dry food he had to eat as a kittypet, and definitely better than the dumpster food. It was amazing. "It's so good," Darken's voice was muffled. He swallowed the bite and took another. "It is, but mice, rabbits and such are even better," Thistle added.

Soon, the rat was devoured and all that remained was bones. Thistle tossed them away, "That was a good meal, better than I've had in a few weeks. You were lucky though, usually rats around here are scrawny."

Darken nodded, "So, are we going to train?"

"Yes," Thistle's tail flicked, "begin." Darken readied himself and lowered into a crouch, then remembered not to wait too long. At

once he leapt and struck Thistle's shoulder. The dark tom turned away, rearing up and swiping down onto his muzzle. Darken winced as his nose pulsed with pain, but quickly recovered and attempted the slide attack again, sliding under, scoring his claws on his underbelly, then swiftly rolling out before Thistle could drop again, like he had in the first training session. Darken remembered, again, that Thistle had told him to be quick, so not waiting another moment, the tom ran around him on the other side. Thistle turned the way he had been, then confused, turned to the other side where Darken was ready to strike again, this time on his chest. Thistle landed a harsh blow to his ear and slammed into him, causing him to stumble back. The breath was driven right out of Darken's body. Thistle approached, and Darken was unprepared to do anything; he was still trying to catch his breath. Instead of attacking again, he said, "Good job. I expected you to be on my other side. It's a good tactic to confuse the opponent and be very quick. Change positions often."

The black tabby nodded, finally getting his breath, replying with a curt thanks. "Be careful when the battle comes. Don't let the Clan cats knock the breath from you like I did. That can leave you vulnerable and open to attack." Darken nodded in agreement; by now he had gained all of his breath and was fine. "Try again." From this command, Darken darted towards Thistle, sinking his teeth into his shoulder. The dark tom raised his paw and struck from the side, causing Darken to collapse. He got to his paws just before Thistle was about to leap, and then moved to the side. The training went on for a while more before Thistle called it to a stop, and Darken was left sitting, exhausted. He curled up, wishing he could at least sleep on a rug, but glad he could rest at all. The tom lay, drifting off into a slumber from sheer tiredness.

Chapter Eight

The black tabby's eyes opened. Surprised, he heaved himself to his paws, in realization that he had went to sleep earlier than usual, and slept until dawn. His muscles were still sore, of course. *With time, I'm sure I'll get used to this.* Darken thought of his family again, Rose and Flint, and his sister Stream, too. He missed them, but shaking away the feeling, the tom made his way to a dumpster and leapt on top of it, and opened up one side. Digging through numerous things, he found a slab of meat, with mold growing on it. Cringing, Darken pulled it out and set it down, sniffing it. It was worse than the half-eaten chicken bone he'd had before. "Yuck..." Even slimier than the chicken, too, it smelled awful, but the entire dumpster reeked. The meat was unidentifiable, but... edible, maybe if he scraped off the mold. *Is there anything better in there?*

He dug around again, but with no luck. Sighing, he turned back to the slab of meat and licked it, recoiling with a disgusted face. Darken shook his head. *I must get used to this. These cats have been living like this for a while.* Using his claws, he scraped off the moldy parts, and took a timid bite, chewing forcefully. *This is better than starving.*

Darken finished the meat, then padded over to a puddle and lapped at the water which was lukewarm like before. This water also tasted strange, different from any water he had at his home. It looked a little dirty, but without the water, he'd die of thirst. Darken finished, and turned away from the puddle, noticing that Bone was approaching. "How's training coming along?"

"Good," Darken dipped his head, "I've learned a lot in combat so far, and I caught a rat yesterday." The dark tabby was glad he had learned so much already. When he returned, he'd be able to tell his family about fighting, how to defend themselves and how to hunt, the excitement. Maybe then their minds would change. "That is impressive for a kittypet," Bone remarked. A little stung, Darken

only nodded, knowing it was the truth. These cats had experience, unlike he did. "Yeah, I suppose it is," he admitted. Bone's tail swayed, "I'll be going now. I only wanted to see how things were going, if you were doing well, and if Thistle was mentoring like he should. Scourge and I must recruit again," he gave a nod of farewell and padded away.

The young tom was left standing alone, a sense of loneliness tugging at his paws. He had nothing much to do. Maybe he could practice hunting again? Darken decided that was what he would do, after all, what else? He scented the air, and yet again, there was nothing he could pick up besides other cats in the alley. *I probably won't smell a rat, anyway.* Darken padded around, observant of his surroundings, but not noticing any quick movements or signs of prey. Lowering into a crouch, he pretended to hunt. The naive cat ambled forward, all senses alert. He stopped after reaching a few tail-lengths away from his starting point, and he glared at nothing in particular; his claws unsheathed. Darken prepared momentum in his hindlegs, then sprang outward, attempting to keep equilibrium as he landed, but stumbling just slightly. *I probably wouldn't have caught anything like that. I just need more practice. I suppose the first time I was only lucky, after all it nearly escaped.*

Darken rose up to a stand once more. It was evident he had already improved quite a bit, but would he ever be as good as Thistle or, more importantly, the Clan cats? Could he defeat them? Thinking, he turned, facing the crowd of BloodClan. *I'll try my absolute best, no matter what it takes*. Chilling tension crept into his mind, the reminder of what Thistle had said; he could be killed. *But I won't let that faze me. I've never had much of a purpose to make a difference until now. The Clan cats deserve to be driven from their homes. They can't get away with nearly killing a kit who hasn't done anything!*

As days passed, he and Thistle trained often. He learned skills and tactics he'd never thought of, and he practiced hunting frequently. Slowly, he became stronger; his muscles weren't as sore. Darken was really getting the hang of being a BloodClan cat. His skills were sharp and his senses were keen. *I bet my family would be proud! I'll have so much to say to them! And I do wish I could speak with them now...* The tom paused for a moment, stopping in his tracks. *Thistle..*

my friends here in BloodClan... I'll miss them too.

But I'm sure I'll see them again! The young novice reassured himself, holding his head high.

Chapter Nine

Three moons exactly had passed, and Darken turned his gaze to look up at the sky which held the full moon. He stood gazing, feeling accomplished. The tom was stronger, much stronger in fact, and more ready for battle. Now his muscles were not sore every morning. He knew more attack moves than ever. The tabby heard the dumpster rattle and his ears perked as he looked over; Scourge was standing accompanied by Bone. Darken made his way over and settled. "BloodClan," the small black tom began, "I call this meeting because we are stronger than we ever have been. We have so many cats now." It was true; even Darken was amazed. The Clan had more than doubled over that time. "For this, we are now battle-ready. Tomorrow, I will go to ask the Clan cats to see if they are willing to give up their forest the easy way. Then, no bloodshed is spilled; however, if they are to refuse, we show them no mercy and return the next day."

BloodClan cheered; every cat yowled with triumph, including Darken. *After all this training, now is finally when we battle.* The tom felt pride coursing through him. Never would he have thought before that this would happen, but it really was. Once again, Darken was reminded of his family and Snowy, but he let the thoughts slide away as he reassured himself like he did every time. *I will see them again. Right after this battle. They will be proud of me. Maybe even impressed!*

"Meeting is dismissed," Scourge called after the cheering had subsided, "train until the battle. Make sure you are fit and ready to fight. Every training session counts." His icy blue eyes narrowed as he scanned the crowd, and he smiled with a satisfied look. Then he leaped down, swiftly landing on the concrete ground of the alley, Bone doing the same moments later. Darken got to his paws, smiling. "Hello?" A voice was heard - one unfamiliar. Darken turned and saw a brown tabby she-cat standing; she had green eyes.

"Hi," Darken returned the greeting, "who are you?"

"I'm a new recruit to BloodClan; I joined a few days ago. My name is Aurora," the she-cat introduced herself.

"Great! I'm Darken. I joined a while back. Welcome to BloodClan," he replied.

"There sure are lots of cats here..." she said, looking around.

"Yeah. Scourge and Bone recruit a lot," he explained, "so, you were a kittypet...?" Darken had no way of knowing. After so many members were recruited, Scourge stopped having meetings for new cats joining the Clan; however, he still initiated them when they first met.

"Yes, I was," Aurora answered, her tail swaying, "were you?"

Darken nodded, "Yes. I had family too, but I am going to return to them."

"So will I! I didn't really tell them," she broke eye contact as she fiddled with her paws, maybe she was thinking Darken would retort with a mean remark.

"Oh, I didn't either," Darken admitted, "I knew they would never let me leave. They were really conscious just about me walking outside."

"That's how my family was. I do miss them. How did you get along without them for such a long time?" Aurora tilted her head.

"I missed them too," Darken sighed, "but I was always curious for adventure. I was longing for something, something exciting to do. Something that held a purpose. I promised myself I would return, though."

"I did too," she said. Aurora wore a pastel pink collar, and like his, the bell had been torn right off. Darken's collar was dirty now, too, and it had some nicks and tears here and there. The dark tabby meowed after a short silence, "It is nice to have someone to talk with."

"It is," she said, "so you have a mentor, right?"

"Thistle is," he said, "but he doesn't train me as much now. I've already learned a lot, but everyday we would train." Darken realized that she probably, well, most likely did not know who Thistle was, as the Clan had grown so much. It was impossible to know everyone. But she would know it was a BloodClan cat.

Aurora nodded, and then added, "I'm hungry... I haven't had a good meal since I left home."

"You haven't had rat, yet?" Darken asked, meeting her gaze.

"No," she sighed, "but I'd like to. Actually, I've never had freshly killed prey."

"You need to try rat," Darken said, "It's great, but there are very little rats in the alley."

"I figured that much," Aurora gazed around, "Look at everyone. They're scrawny."

Darken had lost so much weight that now, his ribs showed underneath his ragged pelt. He silently agreed with the she-cat. "Prey is certainly hard to find," he added. Then the tom sighed. "I'm hungry even now... but with so many cats... it's nearly impossible to find prey. With luck, you find an okay meal in the trash..." Darken recalled his time when he was younger, and he cringed every time he took a bite from the dumpster food. But now, he was accustomed to it. Eating from the dumpster was normal, and for everyone around him, too.

Aurora nodded in understanding. "I'm a bit nervous for this battle, I mean, if the Clans refuse to give up their territory. I'm a bit young to die.."

"So am I," Darken said, "but we all eventually do... and at least it will be for a reason rather than dying old, living a soft life as a kittypet."

"That is true, I suppose," Aurora shuffled her paws, then looked at him, "I'll see you later, maybe? I'm going to attempt to hunt. I know I probably won't succeed, but it is worth a try."

"Okay," Darken replied, "bye. I'd like to talk again." She only nodded as she padded away, her fading pawsteps eventually leaving earshot. The dark tabby decided to groom his pelt as he swiped his tongue across his fur. *The battle is near, and I am ready.* He stopped and looked up again at the sky. *What's a more purposeful life? I am doing good, fighting for the right side. Now this is real purpose. I am proud, as I have come this far...*

Chapter Ten

Darken had slept, like he always did, on the concrete ground of the wide alley. He got to his paws. *Today is the day. Scourge is finally going to confront the Clan cats.* The dark tabby decided he should eat, or at least try to find something. After all, he was very hungry. Some of the cats here were on the brink of starvation. The young tom did not attempt to hunt; instead he padded over to the dumpster. By this time, hunting was basically useless. Cats fought over prey, even though they were supposed to be a Clan. How could Darken blame them? If he was starving, he would probably do the same thing. *It's only instinct, part of survival.* It was hard just to find a meal per day. Darken saw that there were several cats atop the dumpster, all desperately scavenging for any edible things contained in the trash. He waited until there was enough room for him and he leaped onto it, a tomcat already there giving him a grave, despairing expression. "There's barely anything," his tone was hopeless, "it's great that we have cats for our Clan to fight... but we're all starving! There's just not enough to go around."

Darken agreed, his head lowered, "I know. It's so hard to find food now, but... look on the bright side; once we take over the forest, we'll have food! And lot's of it..." He longed to try differing species of prey, perhaps a mouse for once. The training would pay off. BloodClan would reign victorious, and they would live joyously in the forest. Of course, Darken promised to return home. Surely he could visit his BloodClan companions every now and then. He decided he would.

Another cat, a she-cat this time, was sitting on the dumpster, her gaze dull and lifeless. Her ribs showed, which wasn't uncommon, and she appeared dreary, her gaze never leaving her paws. "I've lost my son to starvation," she spoke quietly, her voice misery-filled, "he was so young!" the mother wailed.

Sympathetic, Darken looked at the she-cat, who was a cream colored tabby with green eyes. He could not fully understand her

pain, but she, he could tell, was so awfully sad, and it would be sad to lose a family member. He could not begin to imagine losing his family at home, or even his best friend Snowy. "That's terrible," he sighed, "but he died serving his Clan. What could be more honorable-"

The she-cat yowled in protest, cutting Darken completely off as her eyes filled with fury, "No! I wish I would have never joined this wretched Clan! There has been more deaths other than my son's! Cats are dying, and more deaths will come during the battle. For all we know, we could be fighting for no cause! What if it's all wrong?! The city is no place for a cat to live!"

He was taken aback by her sudden outburst, but remained patient and calm with the grieving mother, "I realize you are in pain, and I am deeply sorry for your loss. You are right; the city is no place for a cat to reside, but once we win, we all will live in the forest. Your son died with honor, training and learning every skill he could muster to fight alongside us."

"But what if we are fighting for no reason! What if Scourge lied, what if the Clans are good..." her voice trailed off as she shook her head, eyes closing, "we have been told they are evil, no-good monsters for nearly killing Scourge when he was a kit... but what if.."

Darken hardly believed what he was hearing. These were traitorous remarks the she-cat was making, but he kept his mouth shut. No way could the Clan cats be good for attempting to kill an innocent kitten. That was pure evil. Just the thought of harming an innocent life... *Scourge and BloodClan are doing the right thing.*

"We are all fighting and training for a good cause, just as... who are you?" The tom began, but he looked to Darken questioningly. The tom was older than him, and he had a dusky brown pelt and white underfur, and now he saw that the tom had amber eyes to complete his appearance.

"My name is Darken," he told him.

The older tom nodded, and he turned to the she-cat. "Sky, as I was

saying, we all are fighting for a good cause, just as this young tom Darken has said. Your son was a loyal cat to BloodClan. Now, don't let him down, and continue training to defeat these Clan cats."

"You're right, Duke," Sky, he presumed, sighed, "I won't let his training go to waste. We will win this battle."

Duke, the brown tom, dipped his head, "Don't let your training go to waste either."

"I won't..." Sky murmured. She gazed into the open dumpster, observing all of the different items, none appealing nor really edible. The creamy she-cat picked out a molded piece of bread. With this food, no one would be fit to fight, and molded bread would not be substantial for the Clan, but they had to make do. What if they lost just because of being weak? Although outnumbered, the Clan cats were healthy and had much more food. Darken looked at the she-cat. She had the bread placed before her. The molded food was definitely anything but appetizing, but Sky looked eager to finally have a meal. She began eating. Darken glanced back to the contents held in the dumpster and sighed. *We have to win.*

He started to dig through the garbage, and Duke accompanied him. Other cats were also digging, and the other dumpsters lining the alley were occupied. Darken found nothing that appeased to him, as expected. "This is so hopeless," Duke sighed, "nothing to eat. How can we go on?"

"There's surely something," he insisted. The dark tabby tom caught sight of a rotted, mushy banana. "Here's something."

"Yeah, that will have to do," the older brown tom frowned.

"You can have the rest of this," Sky spoke up and nudged the remaining bread to the two of them. "Thank you," Darken dipped his head, "this is appreciated." He took a bite of the bread, no longer flinching or cringing at the taste or texture. Any edible food was rare - so much that cats fought daily over scraps of thrown away food. Darken figured that the humans had a surplus of food like the Clan cats, or else they wouldn't dispose so much of it. He was glad,

though. If they did not throw away their food, what would they have to eat?

"Yes, thank you very much," Duke said, and pawed over a mushy piece of banana, "this is what we have found."

Sky nodded and lowered her head to sniff the rotten, barely edible scrap of fruit, flinching slightly, "This isn't very fit to eat, but like everything, it must make do..." The she-cat took a bite of the banana, so soft she did not have to chew. Darken took another bite of the bread, then let Duke eat the rest. After that, he took a bite of the banana. It took him by surprise. The taste was rancid, tasted nothing like food, and disgusting enough to make a cat hurl, but Darken had tasted things about as bad as that. It was really nothing new. He pushed the rest of the soft banana over to Duke, who appeared troubled. Darken understood why. He remembered the times when he had first joined BloodClan. He had found slimy chicken, moldy slabs of meat, but now he would be delighted to find such food. The tom had cringed before, and now that was a rare meal - something he would be so happy to find.

"I'll be going," Darken glanced at Sky and Duke, "perhaps we may meet again." Although still hungry, there was nothing more to eat - it was just all gone. "So long, Darken," Duke returned a goodbye, and Sky mewed, "I bid you farewell." Her head dipped. Darken gave a curt nod and leaped down from the dumpster, back down, swiftly onto the concrete. He was definitely stronger, faster, and wiser, but he felt famished and light-headed. He made his way over to his usual spot and sat, his tail curling around his paws. *Scourge should be leaving soon. Perhaps he can find something to eat... but the entire Clan cannot be fed.*

Chapter Eleven

Darken struck Aurora's flank, his claws sliding along her pelt as he and the she-cat battle trained. With hasty movements, the tom battered at her as the two interlocked and rolled, swiping and clawing. Aurora lashed out her paw, but Darken was quicker as he dodged and flung himself at her, pretending to swipe and give a nasty wound to her throat. They stopped and stood before each other. "If I'd been a Clan cat, I could have left you vulnerable just then. Remember, be quick and don't let the opponent access weak or soft areas on your body such as your throat or belly."

"Okay. That makes sense," Aurora nodded along, "I need to be more agile."

"Yes," A bit nervous for the less experienced she-cat, he sighed, "you really need to train with the time you have left."

"I do," Aurora's tail swayed, her eyes downward, "what if my skills are not good enough to fight them?"

"Give it all you've got, and learn what you can before the battle," Darken advised, "that's all I can say to you."

Aurora paused and then said, changing the subject, "I really am hungry."

"All of us are," he replied dismally, his ears flat, "but we must live through it and win this fight. Thistle told me that a while ago. We have to deal with what we have and muster strength enough to win against the Clans." Aurora dipped her head, seemingly more encouraged. She said no more as she gazed at Darken, prepared to train again. He decided to train with her; now he was experienced enough, as Thistle said, to train other BloodClan novices. However, the session was called short as a yowl rose in the dim alley.

It was Scourge, atop the dumpster, sided by Bone. Some cats were already gathered below it. He scrambled to his paws and ran over

to join the rest of BloodClan. Aurora followed. The crowd filled the entire alley as every cat settled. Exhilaration pulsed through Darken; now Scourge was calling a meeting about confronting the Clan cats. Darken had occupied his time training with Aurora. Scourge's icy glare raked across the crowd and once all was silent, he spoke, "Cats of BloodClan, now it is time that I go to confront the Clans. If they refuse to give up their territory, we will return tomorrow to fight and win. Now is the last full day of training. If they do give up their lands, which I highly doubt, we gain the territory. Nonetheless, no matter the circumstances we may face, *we will win*. BloodClan will take over the forest. The Clans do not deserve their possession over all of that land that could be for us. Rich, natural territory, grass, a gentle breeze, plants, herbs, trees, and best of all, abundance of prey. We must win against them and claim victory. Or else, we all will lose and suffer the consequences; we will perish. I do not accept defeat."

A roar of cheering and triumph rose throughout the crowd.

"Although we are tired, hungry, starving, and miserable, we must fight through the misfortune, grief, and pain. I know that there has been cats to die, but we will win! We will claim that land and BloodClan will rule over the entire forest!" Everyone yowled in agreement, as did Darken and Aurora. In his peripheral vision, Darken caught sight of Sky. She was yowling too, but pain was evident in her eyes. Despite her pain, determination showed as well. Determination, that the whole of BloodClan shared, was for the victory against the Clans. Darken felt it. He knew. They would indeed win.

"Now I will begin my travel. Once I return, I shall give you the response, if they choose to fight or give up," Scourge stated, "this meeting is dismissed."

The black tom with a white paw leaped down from the dumpster, landing swiftly. He made his way to the end of the alley and left. Darken watched. *This is really it. It will be no time until we fight.*

Darken turned to Aurora, "Let's battle train. Our time is limited."

Aurora agreed silently, and her claws unsheathed as she readied

herself. "Go!" Darken sprang towards Aurora. She scrambled, trying to dodge with slow response, but her paws slipped and she was unable to efficiently get away. Darken struck her shoulder. She flinched but gained balance and leaped immediately at the tom, nipping his leg. Darken let out a sudden meow of surprise and slashed out with his claws, slicing her chest. The training went on for a while.

As Scourge returned, everyone stopped their training and looked eagerly at him. Darken and Aurora stopped, and they exchanged glances. The leader of BloodClan strode closer to the cats; they padded forth, and Bone fell in beside him. The two said nothing as they leaped upon the dumpster, and Scourge murmured a few words to Bone before waiting until everyone gathered. "The Clans said they would not easily give up their land. Therefore, tomorrow we will fight. Be ready." All of the cats looked at one another, some uneasy, but their expressions told that they were ready and brave. Darken longed to finally try prey. If they lost the battle, all of the training, deaths, and hardship would all be for nothing. They had to win. Scourge held out some prey - plump rabbits and mice, "I have hunted these from the forest; the Clans are unaware that I stole this."

Cats began yowling and meowing loudly, begging for any prey, and Darken's mouth watered. Several BloodClan cats leaped onto the dumpster, eagerly fighting over the prey he had. "Stop!" Scourge commanded, but even more cats leaped up, desperately trying to get a scrap of the fresh-kill. Bone attempted to stop them, but they managed to get bites of the prey. "I said stop!" Scourge yowled, voice filled with rage. The cats backed away, leaping back down. "I did not say you could just leap onto the dumpster and fight over this food!"

The cats had their ears flattened and their heads lowered. Scourge continued, "I caught this prey so that some cats may get something to eat. Bone and I will get some, and I will toss the rest into the crowd, and whoever gets the prey first, eats it. Cats who began fighting over the prey will not get any." Bone swiftly jumped down, padding over to the group of cats and sending them away from the

crowd. Darken watched in absolute shock; even he was tempted to jump up and get some. The hunger and starvation had turned the cats against one another. *We're supposed to be a unified Clan!*

Once Bone returned, they ate their share and Scourge tossed the remaining prey into the gathered crowd. Darken darted after the prey, managing to catch a scrap of rabbit and he ate hastily. The fresh rabbit tasted amazing; Darken found himself surprised. It was nothing like rat or trash, but it was juicy and plump. He savored the scrap of prey. Aurora managed to get a scrap of mouse, and by then, all of it was gone. "There," Scourge's eyes narrowed, and he glanced to the desperate group of cats who had fought, "I do not tolerate disobedient Clanmates, understood?" Every cat nodded along, fearful, and some disappointed that they did not get any food.

"Train now," and with that, Scourge dismissed the meeting. Darken glanced at Aurora. She spoke quietly, "Our Clanmates are turning on each other."
"I know," Darken sighed, "but we've come a long way. We can't give up now."

Aurora nodded, and the two resumed their training.

Chapter Twelve

The training went on until dusk, and after the moon had shone, hung brightly in the night sky, every cat of BloodClan was asleep. The alley was silent and dark, nothing but hushed, quiet snores filling the air, including Darken's. Eventually, the sun rose, and it was dawn. Dim light filtered throughout the alley, and cats were awakening. Darken awoke and rose to his paws. He was very anxious, but he was ready. He was confident that BloodClan would indeed win the battle. Observant of the alley and the actions of other cats, he noticed that the majority were scavenging for any food in the dumpster, and most, like always, had no luck. He decided to test his own luck by padding over to search. There he waited until an open space was available atop the dumpster, and the tom leaped up, digging through various pawfuls of trash. A cat pulled out a scrap of chicken, and Darken gazed at the food in awe; that was rare. Darken could taste the chicken almost; if only he had gotten that. It rightfully belonged to the finder, however. The cat appeared elated, more than grateful to have found the chicken. Other cats surrounding them looked hungry and envious that the cat found such food. They seemed on edge, ready to steal. Then one, a tomcat, finally did it. He struck at the chicken quickly, eating it in a heartbeat with no hesitation. The finder of the chicken, who was a she-cat, gasped and her fur bristled. "That was mine!" she yowled.

The tom looked very guilty and shameful, his ears flattened and tail drooping, "Yes, it was yours, but you dangled it in front of us. Almost teasingly. You should have eaten it sooner."

"It was still mine, and you stole it!" She hissed. Darken drowned out the rest of the fight; instead, he kept digging through the trash, and a sigh emitted from his mouth. *How sad... we are willing to steal from each other.* Eventually, he found some turkey, and he very graciously pulled it out. Darken paid no attention to the smell of it, but he began eating almost instantly. It made it easier to eat; the smell of everything in the dumpster would be horrific. Darken also

did not want what happened to the she-cat to happen to him, so he ate it and swallowed without a moment of hesitation. The tom was satisfied. He jumped down, swiftly landing upon the concrete ground. *We should be leaving very soon. I hope everyone is ready.*

Darken found Thistle and decided to walk over to him; he hadn't had a conversation with his old mentor in a while. "Hey, Thistle," he began, slowing to a stop.

"Oh," Thistle saw Darken, recognition flashing in his eyes, "hey Darken. How are you?"

"I'm alright," he meowed, "I'm... a bit nervous. But I'm prepared."

"That's good. To be a bit nervous is normal. It gets your adrenaline going," Thistle said, "just don't get so nervous you forget your training."

That made him even more nervous, but he shook the feeling away, reassuring himself, "Yeah, that would be a disaster."

"You've been training with other cats. Is mentoring going well for you?"

"It is, actually," Darken said, "I'm passing on everything you taught me."

"Great," Thistle dipped his head, "we should train with the remaining time we have. If you'd like, you can go get a cat you've been mentoring and we can all train together."

"Sounds good," Darken nodded, and he padded away. He looked around for Aurora. After a few moments of searching, he caught sight of the young she-cat where she normally was and made his way over. Darken approached, and she gazed up at him, smiling briefly, "We're going to train?"

"Yes," he replied, "with my old mentor, Thistle. We'll all train together. We may have to fight more than one cat at a time in the battle."

"Alright, that's a good idea," Aurora agreed, and Darken waved his

tail dismissively and began padding back to the spot. The feline followed closely after, and the two approached the spiky-furred tom, Thistle. He looked at them both, "Hello, who are you?"

"I'm Aurora," the she-cat introduced herself, anxiety present in her expression.

"Don't worry," Thistle assured, as if a mind-reader, "just be prepared."

"I hope I will be ready," her eyes flashed with uncertainty.

"You will be. You *must* be. The Clan cats will not show mercy, and neither shall we," Thistle broadly stated, "we must be brave. Without courage and strength, we are nothing."

Aurora nodded along with the tom's words.

"Whatever happens, we absolutely must be ready. We are BloodClan. We have been training for so long, and finally, we show our determination and our strength. What we will never show, is fear."

Seemingly more relaxed, the she-cat replied, "Okay. You are right. I suppose there is no reason to be fearful. After all, we are a strong Clan."

"We outnumber every Clan, and we will easily win this battle. Just you wait," Thistle added, "now let's train. We can't spare a single moment." Darken had agreed with every single word the tom spoke. He was definitely right; BloodClan was strong, and the Clan would win. The training went on with no breaks or moments for rest. Every cat trained; there was no doubt in any cat's mind that they would win. *Winning the fight is necessary to the survival of my Clanmates. If we don't win, what will become of us? BloodClan has to take the forest!*

Scourge stood atop the dumpster he addressed meetings on; pride and determination filled his icy gaze. Once he had gained everyone's attention, the tom announced, "Now is finally time. We

will make our way to the forest and then fight." BloodClan exchanged glances with one another, all appearing battle-ready and confident. Darken dipped his head to Aurora who was beside him in a reassuring way to tell her, *Make it count. Make all of the training count. Every second of training, every moment of being a BloodClan cat...* Every cat gathered themselves together, Scourge and Bone at the front, "Hurry and don't look back! Run along the sidewalk and stay together. It's easy to get left behind or taken by a human. Whatever we face, face it with bravery!" With that, he ran out the alley, Bone just beside him, and the rest of BloodClan hurrying after at a quick pace. Humans nearby, Darken noticed, were shocked. What was so surprising? They used these sidewalks and roads all the time! His heart thumping wildly in his chest, familiar exhilaration pulsing throughout his body, Darken raced after his Clanmates. They reached the end and skidded to a halt. A busy road stretched out before them, blocking their way; Darken, as a young novice, had taken this route to get to the alley. He remembered so clearly when he had been recruited to join. "Now!" Scourge screeched and BloodClan darted across the road and on to the other side; no one was hurt. They continued to run and eventually reached the metal fence that Scourge, Bone, and he had encountered before.

However, they didn't climb under like Darken had. Scourge ordered them to simply climb quickly over the fence. Cats began darting up and leaping over. Darken hooked his claws, maintaining a strong grip with his paws, climbing over and reaching the top. The tabby tom leaped out and landed in grass on the other side; he missed the feel of it. It had been so long since he had felt the soft grass under his paws. Undoubtedly, it felt so much better than hard concrete. The harder surface had hardened his paw pads over time. Darken and the rest of BloodClan traveled on, up the hill that gave a wide view of the city. Scourge, and then everyone, stopped. Darken gazed out at the vast expanse of the city, which had been his home for moons. Then he turned to look out at the forest before the group of cats. It had been so long. Darken comfortably felt the grassy ground, breathing in the fresh air. As they went on, trees began to surround them. Bushes and other lush vegetation engulfed the cats. Then a sense of reality hit him; Darken realized just what they were doing. All of BloodClan was walking into battle, onto enemy land.

What lay before them were battle-ready Clan cats, eager to defend their territory. Inhaling and exhaling deep breaths, the tom calmed himself and once again, reassured himself. *We will win.* The three words echoed in his mind, replayed over and over. He rehearsed battle moves in his head. Over and over.

This is it. Moons of training have come to this very moment. "We are in Clan territory," Scourge said much more quietly, "prepare for battle." Withholding a breath, he shut his eyes. *BloodClan will not back down!*

Chapter Thirteen

The entirety of BloodClan was now on Clan territory, and the battle would begin soon. Darken's heart was beating fast; all of his senses were alert. Aurora and Thistle sided him. Thistle was confident, prideful, and ready. He was completely prepared to start fighting. Aurora, however, had begun to look nervous again, but she didn't back down. Darken was also ready. BloodClan couldn't lose, not after all of the training and hardship it required to prepare these cats. It would and could not go to waste. Cats had given their lives to BloodClan, and the survivors could not fail them.

"We will win this fight," Scourge claimed, "no matter what it takes. BloodClan shall take the forest!"

Every cat joined in with yowls of agreement. Bone yowled, "BloodClan will rise!"

"*BloodClan will rise*!" The crowd repeated. Scourge dipped his head, smiling with satisfaction as he went onward, just beside his deputy, Bone. Then Darken saw them; he caught sight of the Clan cats, and they appeared ready, not intimidated in the slightest. Well, neither was BloodClan! Darken was very confident in his Clan. *Victory is ours. These Clan cats may as well paw over their territory without a proper fight. They'll lose! They had no knowledge of this battle. Therefore, they couldn't have prepared, right?*

There was silence, sheer tension in the air. Darken felt his adrenaline begin to rush in his veins. From instinct, his claws unsheathed. Aurora was shaking, he noticed. He glanced over, concerned, and he told the she-cat, "This is it. BloodClan will win. Push through and perservere with everything, all the strength you can muster-"
"BloodClan! Attack!" Scourge sudden yowl pierced the air, the order ringing out in the hollow. At once, a ginger tom just across from the BloodClan cats echoed, "LionClan! Attack!"
Cats darted forward, on towards opposing sides. Turmoil began to

quickly unfold as enemy Clans lunged at one another, pinning, clawing, kicking, and biting. Thistle gave a very curt, brief nod of his head to Darken, as if to say, *Fight for BloodClan, and remember all I taught you.*
He did not have time to nod back. Thistle had turned away and was gone, lost in the sea of fighting cats. A cat slammed into his body, knocking him off his paws. Darken stumbled and fell back, alarm and shock filling his senses.
I was left vulnerable! I wasn't alert!

Gaining focus and a clear image of who had made the attack, he saw an unfamiliar white tom, hovering just above the dark tabby. Darken quickly rolled to the side, getting to his paws. *You won't get me that easily!*
Hastily, he leaped forth at the tom, slashing out with his claws and striking his cheek, leaving a deep gash. The cat winced, growling in frustration as he struck Darken's chest. The two interlocked, rolling and fighting, striking out with well-aimed attacks. Undeniably, his adversary was skilled in fighting and was a challenge to fight, but he fought hard against the tom. He gave everything he had, never once faltering.

Eventually they split apart. Darken recognized Sky, fighting for her life. A tom had pinned her, just moments away from biting her throat with a killing blow. *No! You won't kill her.*
He sprinted towards the two, taking the Clan cat by surprise. He lunged at his back, hooking his claws painfully deep into his spine, and dragging downward.
The tom screeched in fury, releasing Sky and whipping around. Darken, however, did not lose or soften his grip. Sky looked relieved, flashing Darken an expression of sincere gratitude. The former mother bounded away, returning to battle.
Darken slammed his paw into the tom's head, still maintaining his balance and location atop his back. He dug his claws inward and raked back, ripping fur off his face. The tom shrieked in pain and anger, turning and clamping his teeth onto the tabby's paw. Immense pain shot from his paw along his foreleg, and he yelped in surprise.

The cat flung him off and fleed, off to fight a different BloodClan

cat. Darken stood warily, recovering in silent pain from the vicious bite. He did not take long before he moved along, not wanting to be out in the open for a surprise attack. Darken had learned that lesson. He came upon an interlocked duo in a serious fight. A Clan cat was winning. Before he had a chance to defend the BloodClan cat, the Clan cat was standing over the lifeless body, a tom. Darken witnissed the life leave his eyes and his limbs go limp.
Shocked, he stood glaring. The she-cat who had killed the tom turned, seeing Darken and narrowing her eyes. She was a sandy feline with green eyes.

He stood his ground, not backing away or quivering in fear. Rather, Darken prepared himself to fight the cat.
She darted forth, and Darken dodged, letting her skid to a halt. She whipped around angrily.
This cat killed my Clanmate!

Motivated to return the favor, Darken leaped at the she-cat, managing to slide his claws along her side, ripping fur off in the process. She flinched but turned, raking her claws along his flank. He growled and bit her leg, teeth like thorns piercing the she-cat's flesh. Darken attempted to twist so that he could break a bone, but he was stopped. She slammed her rear legs into Darken's chest, the powerful kick knocking him back at least a tail-length.
He regained equilibrium and tried the slide attack. He lowered and slid under her body, battering at her belly before rolling out. Causing her to become confused of his location, Darken had just enough time to do another attack. The tom struck her muzzle and left a wound sure enough to sting and send pain through her nose. The sandy she-cat growled, lashing out with her claws. She raked across his shoulder; Darken hissed and reared back, and he slammed down with his forepaws and slashed the cat's chest. He leaped out and pinned her down, dragging his claws painfully down her exposed belly. She screeched and battered at his face which quickly began to sting. Ignoring the pain, he chose to keep clawing at her belly and even her throat. Then, all of a sudden, Darken was thrown off the she-cat. A tom had flung him away to defend the she-cat. She seemed thankful. *I almost had her. That was a great position! I was going to kill that cat... she killed a Clanmate of mine.*

Hissing, he spat at the two, but they decided not to fight him. Both sprinted away; Darken presumed they were teaming up to kill another BloodClan cat. Darken quickly followed, running after the duo, trying to keep up as he remained unnoticed. However, he lost sight of the cats, and he stopped. "Rat dung," he muttered lowly under his breath. Darken wasted no time to locate another Clan cat and leap back into battle. The fighting went on, no clear indication of which side was winning; both were about the same in how many cats they had. He reasoned that since there was more than one Clan, all teamed together to fight against BloodClan. *We have a lot of cats on our side!*

As time passed, more and more cats from either side were being killed. Bodies lay in the hollow, only bundles of fur and blood. Fur was scattered across the clearing; every which way cats were fighting for their lives. *This is so violent.* Darken sighed. *Of course it would be. It's a war about cats fighting over land and the injustice that Scourge faced as a kit.* He received flashbacks of when he was younger and naive, desperate to do something thrilling with his life. Now, he had. Now, Darken saw the true meaning of battle. He had learned and developed a sense of maturity. It was in no way fun like he'd initially thought. It energized him, but it was scary. Deep down, Darken did fear dying. Still, he was completely sure that BloodClan would claim victory. *But this has taken a toll on all of us. So many lives were claimed by starvation and, obviously, this battle.* He considered what the opposing side thought - the Clan cats. Did they really think they were fighting for the right side? Or did they know they were cruel and evil? He thought back to what Sky had said - the grieving mother who was so heartbroken over her son's death. *They have to be evil! Who in their right mind would attempt to murder an innocent kitten?!*

Darken cleared his thoughts and continued to fight. He noticed BloodClan cats, some, fleeing from the battle. *Traitors!*

They betrayed BloodClan! How dare they?

Darken suppressed the urge for his body to give out; he was exhausted from the battle, but the dark tabby did not back down.

Chapter Fourteen

Still, there was no indication of the winning side of the battle. In the midst of the clearing, Darken was fighting against a gray tom, wondering when it would be over. Would the Clans surrender? Would they fight until the majority of cats died? What would determine the end? Scratches and wounds, some more severe than others, littered the tom's body. He kept fighting, still absolutely determined to win. However, Darken did realize, this battle would be harder to win than he originally thought. The battle was gruesome and by far the most violent event he had ever witnessed; of course, he hadn't seen much in his life as a kittypet. A creeping doubt began to shadow his mind. Would BloodClan really be victorious? After all, the two sides were even. Darken knew so many lives would be taken, consisting of both Clan cats' and BloodClan's. Screeches and yowls, loud and continuous, filled the hollow. The gray tom fighting against Darken was equally as skilled as him, as were the rest of the Clan cats. Exhausted, he still fought.

Darken eventually split apart from his opponent like the rest. What caught his eye was Aurora, giving everything she had to fight a huge Clan tomcat. He hadn't seen her during the whole battle until then. She was a long distance away from Darken, but he ran after them. Before he could arrive and fight alongside the she-cat, the enemy was slamming his claws across her throat, relentlessly attacking with brute force. The brown tabby feline was taken aback, stumbling and lashing out with her claws, the deadly wound taking effect on her fighting ability. Alarm flooding his senses, he hurried his pace. *No! Not Aurora, not her too!*

Sprinting as fast as he could, he was almost to Aurora when a sudden force shoved him over, and he was tumbling to the ground. A cat hovered above him, claws sinking into his chest. A she-cat was pinning him down, hissing and dragging her claws down his belly. Flinching, Darken growled and pushed upward with his paws, desperate to get away, "Let me go you fleabrain!"

"Why should I ever let you go?!" She retorted. Darken mustered enough strength to push back, interlocking and fighting the feline. He nipped her hind leg then ran away, managing to escape that fight. By the time he was on his way to Aurora again, she was laying weakly. Blood transitioning to ice, Darken hurriedly approached the terribly wounded she-cat. "Aurora?" he prompted, nudging her with his paw. And it was too late. Her lifeless body was nothing more than fur and blood. "No... Aurora!" Darken stood shocked. "Open your eyes." The only sounds heard were the bloodcurdling yowls of fighting cats nearby.

"You can't be dead..." he muttered after a few moments. "Aurora, you're too young to die. You can't go like this.." The tom who had killed her was long gone; Darken looked up trying to locate him, but to no avail. He looked down at Aurora, sadness falling over him. *She really is gone... forever.* It wasn't like death was uncommon; it was all around him, but he had lost Aurora, his dear friend. He had enjoyed their talks and their time together. This battle had taken her life away. Grief clouding his thoughts, he longed to stay with her. Darken nosed her, murmuring quietly, "You were brave. You fought well.. although too young to die, you served BloodClan until your last dying breath." Silently mourning, he kept the same position, knowing and finding it hard to accept he had lost a friend, someone he knew well, someone he had trained, someone he related to, and someone who he had begun to regard deeply. Exhaling a breath he didn't know he had, Darken lifted his head. *Goodbye, Aurora.*

He realized this situation was so unfair; the she-cat was innocent, having done nothing wrong. She was only defending her fellow Clanmates. Darken knew he had to return to battle. It was his duty as a BloodClan cat to keep fighting; he surely would not turn and flee like some had. *We can't lose,* the thought repeated in his mind, *for Aurora, and for every single cat who gave their life.* Reluctantly, the tabby left her, off to fight again. And the fighting went on for a long while, Darken becoming more and more weary. Tiredness tugged at his paws. He wished for the battle to finally be over, and he started to question if it would ever end. More lives were taken. Yowls still pierced the air. Yet, the question still lingered - who was winning? It remained unanswered. Darken caught occasional glimpses of cats

he recognized - Sky, Duke, Thistle, and of course, Scourge and Bone. Surrounding him were cats dying, some still on the brink of death, and awfully wounded cats. More and more bodies lay among the clearing. Still, some BloodClan cats were retreating before the battle had ended. Would that determine the end - would they actually lose? The loss of Clanmates could very well result in a lost battle. How could they give up, after all this training and all the challenges every BloodClan cat faced? As a kittypet, never before would he imagine that a battle could be so bloody and violent. It was horrid; complete havoc resonated in the minds of every cat. Darken's pelt was bedraggled and blood had stained his fur. The sight of lifeless bodies had been an utter shock at first, but now it was normal. He had grown used to it. And still, Aurora's death was fresh on his mind. He was devastated, yet he had to contain his feelings and continue on with the fight. The poor young she-cat - how couldn't he had seen it? She was inexperienced, and she definitely hadn't received the amount of training Darken had. The tabby tom drowned out the sound of pain-filled shrieks, focusing hard on the battle and attack moves he could use. *It will be over in time. I must fight. I must go on.*

The words played over in his head.

Fight after fight, he grew more and more tired. Painful wounds covered his body; most would be scarred on him for life. Although still fighting with the encouraging words repeating in his mind, Darken kept thinking of Aurora. It was hard for him to fathom the death of the she-cat. She was, after all, one of the best friends he had in BloodClan. Her death was so sad; Aurora wanted to defend her Clan with everything she had, and yet, she was just too inexperienced. The image of Aurora, scared to be going into battle - it haunted him. Her life in entirety was sad, really. According to what Aurora had said, her home life was similar to his. Her family did not care much for adventure, just like Darken's, and when she finally had the opportunity for it, she was killed brutally by the enemy. *Where is she now?* The sudden thought entered his mind. *Where did her spirit go?*

Darken was reminded of StarClan, the so-called warrior ancestors who looked down upon Clan cats, and he realized it must have been

very soothing to them - to know that when loved ones died, they were safely walking among stars. It was indeed a strange concept, but it would be relieving. StarClan certainly couldn't be real, though. There was no way; it had to be a made-up story to ease troubled cats. So where was Aurora? Was she just... gone? Did the she-cat just go away, never to return, never to live again? The thought began to gnaw at him and trouble him. There had to be somewhere dead cats went; Darken had never thought of it. He hated the idea of just disappearing, just going away like her existence was never real. Truthfully, the tom wanted to believe StarClan existed, but it simply was not real, and if these evil cats believed in 'StarClan', then perhaps it wasn't good. It sure seemed like it, though. While in deep thought, Darken had just fought whoever came at him; he attacked without really focusing, and he realized he needed to. As much as he wanted to give out and collapse, Darken forced himself to go on. Every other cat still fighting was, so surely he could. Now, Darken paid no attention to the loud yowls and screeches. He ignored the pain shooting down his limbs and the soreness wracking his body. However, he still could not push Aurora's death out of his thoughts.

Chapter Fifteen

Darken was beginning to worry; the battle, still going strong, gave no sign of ending. Everywhere the tom turned, a body, either from BloodClan or the Clans, was laying lifelessly. The terrible sight of spilled blood covered the battlefield. All of the blood nearly made him sick. He still wondered where their spirits were going. Were they going anywhere at all? As Darken had thought previously, he hated that concept; the thought of Aurora just disappearing for eternity sounded awful. The tabby had just finished a fight with a tom, and now he was engaged in a fight with a she-cat. Outstretched paws battered and lashed at him, swiping at his face and chest. Darken leapt back out of the way of the she-cat's attacks, and he darted at her. He slammed into her body, taking her aback. She, surprised, staggered backward and lost her balance. Taking the opportunity, Darken sank his claws into her shoulders, keeping her down as the tom pinned her. His claws hooked inward, and the she-cat visibly flinched in pain. She began thrashing, desperately attempting to slip out of his grasp; however, Darken kept her against the ground. While confined, the feline attempted to kick at him. He pressed down with all his strength, then he raked down her belly. The she-cat screeched. Crimson blood oozed from the wound, and it surrounded her body. She still did not give up her efforts to escape. While she wildly thrashed, she threw attacks at random. However, they were poorly aimed. Darken's teeth met with her throat. His teeth pierced her flesh deeply, and instantly more blood gushed. It soaked her fur and stained the grass under them. The she-cat was gazing up at the dark tom, seemingly no regret in her eyes. Soon, the life faded from her body. All that remained was freshly spilled blood and fur. Darken released the Clan cat, taking a pawstep backward. His eyes locked on the sight of her limp body, surprise settling in. He realized he had killed a cat, taken the life of her. His gaze trailed down until it reached his bloody paws. He was doused in sticky, crimson fluid. *Never would I ever think that I would look like this... covered in another cat's blood. I killed. I took her life. But isn't that what a war is practically all about? Killing the enemy?* But it seemed somewhat wrong and unsettling to Darken. *No, these cats*

are not good... as far as Scourge said, they deserve all of this.

The dark tabby looked up again, just in time to catch a glimpse of another tom's eyes. The tom's eyes flashed with fury and indignation. Darken glared steadfastly at the other cat, his claws remaining unsheathed. *He's angry about this she-cat's death,* he reasoned. The tom, suddenly, was bounding towards Darken, quickly and fearlessly. He had well enough time to make sure the tom would not leap and knock him over. Darken dodged when he tried, and the tom landed swiftly on his paws, only to turn right back around. He, at once, darted at Darken and struck his throat. He winced, striking back at his cheek. The tom growled, ignoring the attack, and he leaped forth, slamming Darken to the grassy ground. He was thrown over and landed with a thud. Darken yowled as the tom pinned him, his claws drilling into his shoulders. The tomcat yanked backward, wrenching both of the tabby's shoulders and dislocating them. Intense, stinging pain shot through his forelegs. *I have to get away, or he will kill me!*

Fear beginning to pump through his veins, Darken thrashed just as the she-cat before had. The Clan tom raked down; blood trickled rapidly down his sides. He slashed his throat. A shrill screech escaped Darken, agonized pain coursing along his throat to his stomach. *What if I die? What if I die?* Panicking and unsure of what to do, he lashed out with his paws, kicking at the other tom. Darken kicked outward with his hindpaws, desperately trying to get him off. With one weak kick, the tabby was surprised to find the grasp on him was gone. Thistle, standing just before him, had thrown the Clan cat off. Quickly, he ran over to Darken. "Oh no..."

"Thank you, Thistle," Darken rasped, relieved, "I thought I was going to die."

"With those wounds, it can mean nothing good. I don't know a thing about herbs," Thistle fretted, alarmed, "I saw.. Aurora's dead body."

Darken flinched at the reminder.

"A lot of BloodClan is being killed, but, luckily the same can be said for the Clan cats," he continued, "..I just don't know how we will determine victory."

"I don't either! We just keep fighting."

"Exactly. Now, Darken, that hurts doesn't it?"

Darken nodded feebly, "It does. It hurts worse than any other wound I have received before."

"I figured," he sighed, "your throat was sliced. It's still bleeding. What are you going to do?"

"I... I don't know," Darken realized that death was still a possibility.

"I will find something," Thistle assured, and with that, he sprinted away. The dark tabby got to his paws, and pain once again shot through his shoulders. They could not support him, so he collapsed. Then, his heart skipping a beat, he saw the tomcat who had nearly killed him. He had returned. Bitter resentment glittered in his enemy's eyes. Darken attempted to stand once more, only to falter and fall again. He crawled away, fearful. He had no chance of defending himself in this state. The tom started towards Darken. His heart pumping quickly, he questioned if joining this fight had been worth it. His life would be taken away if he could not escape this tom. Darken forced himself to stand, and the agonizing pain again shot along his forelegs and shoulders. He gritted his teeth, grimacing. The pain was sharp and hurt tremendously, but he knew that if he gave in that the opponent would kill him - and with ease. Barely able to stand, Darken padded away, trying not to move his shoulders. Of course, he had to, but he moved them at the very minimum. Dragging his paws along, the tabby realized that the Clan tom could easily catch up. He was in no state to run. What if he had to, though? Giving a quick, brief glance backward, his heart dropped immediately. The cat was sprinting at him. *Oh no, what will I do? I can't run!* He thought. *What if I die? No, no, I can't. I just have to bear the pain and go!*

Quickening his pace and flinching even more, he felt the most pain he had ever in his life. It hurt more than he even imagined. But this was better than dying. Darken ran faster, paws beginning to thrum against the forest floor as he went. The pain was almost so bad he faltered again; he had to force himself to go on. *Where's Thistle?* Struggling, Darken kept on running, but the tom was

gaining on him. His adversary clearly saw the opportunity to attack and kill him; after all, this was the perfect time to do so - when he was weak and almost unable to muster enough strength to keep running. Fear continued to pulse throughout him. With another quick glance back, his eyes widened. There he was, only a few pawsteps away. He approached Darken, striking him down with a blow of his forepaw. The dark tabby fell over, letting out a yowl. He landed directly on the ground, hitting his wrenched shoulder. More pain, about ten times worse it seemed, instantly shot through it.

"You won't get away, or win this battle," the tom snarled, "the forest is ours!"

Claws painfully slashing along his other shoulder, blood seeped and stained his ragged fur. Another yowl escaped his throat. From Darken's peripheral vision, he caught sight of the spiky-furred tom, Thistle. In his jaws were leaves. Relief washed over him, but fear still remained. Just because he returned did not mean he would certainly live. Lashing weakly out at his enemy, he managed to claw at his chest. But it did nothing to faze him. The Clan cat angrily hissed, about to attack once more. Then, Thistle leapt and knocked him over, and the two tumbled onto the ground. Darken hissed in pain as he lifted to his paws. He padded away and sat farther off, outlying the battlefield. Breathing heavily, Darken began to feel weaker and lightheaded. Thistle fought with the tom, using his very best battle moves and tactics. *Thank you, Thistle. Without your help, I would have definitely been killed by that Clan cat.* He silently thanked the BloodClan tom. Thistle gave him serious wounds, but he did not get away unscathed either. He rushed over to Darken to assist with his deadly wounds and picked up the leaves collected.

"Here, I'll press these against the cuts. Maybe that'll stop the bleeding. Like I said," Thistle began, hastily beginning his medical work as he spoke, "I know nothing about healing at all. But this should help. Better than nothing." The leaves were rather big, and the tom pressed forcefully against his sliced throat. It hurt, but Darken did not protest. It was absolutely necessary for his life. The bleeding stopped. "The problem is, leaves don't just stick. So I'll have to press and hold down... if only they could stay put."

"Wrap them around?" Darken suggested, his words feeble and quiet. Thistle strained to hear around the distant screeches and yowls.

"Right, that's a good idea," he replied, and Darken lifted so that Thistle could perform the action. Thistle wrapped the leaf around his neck, binding it tightly. The bleeding stopped altogether. "There, that's the only deadly wound. So you should be fine. Now let's go fight," he said quickly.

"My shoulders..." Darken grunted, standing in pain, "it's hard to walk, let alone fight. They were dislocated by that tom."

"I sliced his throat, just like he did yours," Thistle said, "he should be no threat now. If he is, he will be easier to fight. Your shoulders are a problem though..."

"What do I do?" the tabby was wincing as he stood.

Thistle sighed, seemingly contemplating decisions before finally saying, "I will fight alongside you."

"That's.. better than me going alone, but I will not be able to properly fight, no matter what happens. I can swipe and claw, but weakly. My aims won't be accurate. I will fail each fight, and I will be a disadvantage. I'm afraid... I can fight no longer," Darken stated, his head lowering in shame. It was true, but he hated to admit the fact. It was simply out of his power. He was injured, and badly.

Thistle remained silent for a few moments before replying, "I see. You are worthy to be a BloodClan cat, though, Darken. Always remember that." It was if Thistle could sense his shameful demeanor. He could tell that he was saddened, and he was trying to higher his spirits, "It's alright. You have done what you can. Stay put in the outskirts of the battle. Behind a bush, perhaps. I will continue to fight."

Darken nodded; what Thistle told him was true. But he was still disheartened.

"You didn't run away like some BloodClan traitors did. You remained, and you fought bravely. That's all that is asked of you,"

Saying no more, Thistle wasted no time to get back into the battle and fight.

Chapter Sixteen

Darken was laying and hiding behind a bush, away from the battling cats. He wished he could fight more, but he just wasn't able. Enduring the stinging pain, the dark tabby tom observed. It was just as violent as when the fight began. As Darken watched, he realized that the indication of victory remained unclear. *Will it ever end? So many are dying. What's going to happen?* His icy blue gaze trailed the hollow, and he began to feel uneasy. He looked down. Darken did not expect this when he initially joined BloodClan; he didn't know it was this brutal, this violent, and this bloody. He had expected and wanted, longed for an adventure, which he did get, but he had to kill another cat. Darken's goal was to kill, and yet that still unsettled him. It seemed against his morals; would his family really be proud? What if they were angry? After all, adventure did not matter to them. Purpose did not matter to them. All they wanted was food, water, and shelter. They had all they needed, but Darken had desperately wanted action to be put into his life. He still did, but it was at a price. He had to go hungry for days upon days, watch cats be killed mercilessly. And Aurora. She was far too young, and many of the cats fighting there were too. Darken had developed a close bond with the she-cat, along with Thistle. But he related to Aurora on many levels; her life was similar. They naturally got along. *If only she was still alive.* Familiar sadness crept into his mind. *She's gone forever though...*

Pushing the sadness away, he looked back up at the battle before him. The tabby attempted to locate Thistle among the cats, but he couldn't. And all of a sudden, he caught sight of Scourge, fighting against a ginger tom. Scourge was fighting greatly; he had amazing tactics and strategies. The small black tom slashed his claws at the other tom. His claws ran deep along his chest and throat. The BloodClan leader moved swiftly and efficiently. The ginger tom collapsed. He lay, terribly wounded on the blood-stained grass, breathing heavily. Slowly, his breathing subsided. Scourge gazed triumphantly at the tom. Upon further inspection, Darken realized he was indeed dead. His body lay limply; there was no doubt.

Scourge was clearly very satisfied; was the tom a leader of the Clans? By his reaction, it seemed like that. After his celebration, the black tomcat padded away to fight another cat. Sighing, Darken slumped back down. He wished he could go out and fight again. Perhaps he could. He got to his paws at a slow pace, but once again pain was sent through his shoulders and forelegs. The tabby lowered. *There's still no way.*

If Scourge had killed a leader, maybe then that was going to determine the end. Was the ginger tom an important cat? Darken looked back up, and he could hardly believe his eyes. The tom was standing, better than ever as if he wasn't injured at all. The wounds were even gone! What happened? Surely it wasn't the same cat. But it was. Scourge was nearby, and he turned. Darken could see the immediate shock replacing his smug expression. He was dumbfounded, and the same could be said for Darken. After the initial shock, Scourge's eyes narrowed. He angrily darted at the ginger tom, ready to finish him off. *Apparently, the tom never died. Wow, I could have sworn by my life he was! He was limp and lifeless. Maybe he's just good at playing an act. He sure looked completely dead.* The leader of BloodClan fought against the Clan cat, both using all of their strength and ability. Claws struck against fur and flesh, blood was shed, and the will of the cats to kill each other was strong. Fury lit their eyes. Darken never took his gaze away; he watched intently. To his dismay, the ginger tom seemed to be winning. *You're supposed to be dead! You're supposed to be wounded! No! Scourge cannot be killed. If he is, the Clan cats will surely win!*

His eyes were wide; he was so concentrated and focused on the two fighting cats, he ignored all other surroundings. Scourge, unfortunately, was easily being defeated. He was injured from the previous fight, while strangely the ginger tom had no injuries. *How is that even possible?* Scourge was struck down, and he lay on the ground. Darken's eyes widened to their extent. *No, no! Scourge! I have to save him!* He forced himself to stand and quickly padded towards Scourge and the ginger tom, bearing the pain. *I'm wounded though. I know I can't fight!* Darken wondered if he really should go. *I have to. Scourge will die without me.* However much it hurt, and however much the odds were not in his favor, he still went on. Although his wrenched shoulders slowed him, he never once

stopped. Darken kept going determinedly. He saw that the Clan cat finished him off with a strike of his claws. Faltering, the tabby stopped and his mouth went ajar. "No!" he wailed. "Scourge!" Cats of BloodClan nearby looked immediately at Scourge, seeing that their leader was lifeless. Darken hurriedly went over to the black tom, and he surely was dead. *If that cat can look as dead as he was and seemingly come back to life, you can too Scourge!*

"Wake up," Darken prodded him, "come on, we have to win this battle!"

There was no response.

He's dead.

Havoc quickly set in the minds of all BloodClan cats. Darken tried to keep them together and encourage them to keep fighting, but it was no use. They ran from battle, panicking. "We're going to lose!" Darken yowled.

"It's over," a tom he did not know replied as he ran by, "we won't win!"

"But we can!"

No cat listened. They all fled. Darken maneuvered his way through the cats, trying to find Thistle again. "Thistle, Thistle!" he called. Moments later, the spiky-furred tom emerged from the crowd, "I'm here." Disappointment showed in his expression, as did Darken's. "We-We're going to lose this battle... they're all leaving! We fought all this time! We trained, we went through so much suffering!"

"I know," Thistle's eyes lowered to the ground in front of him, "it's useless now."

"What are we to do? Where does BloodClan go? Is Bone the new leader?" Darken spat a flurry of questions.

"Bone's dead," Thistle stated. The words hit Darken like a stone. Who would be leader, then? Thistle seemingly read his mind, "BloodClan very well may split apart and go their separate ways. We lost, and for a very high cost. No cat is leader. No cat has the

authority to determine the leader."

"You would be a good leader! We can train harder, we can fight again! We will win if we try harder," Darken insisted.

"Give it up," Thistle sighed, "There is no way. Look at them. Just look, they're running and yowling. They have fled. We have no direction without Scourge. Who would listen to me?"

"I would...." Darken trailed off.

"But you are not the entirety of BloodClan," the tom replied, "Everyone would declare to be leader. A fight would arise within our own Clan. We cannot go on as BloodClan anymore." Thistle appeared distraught, "It pains me as much as it does you. I wish things were not like this."

Silence followed, and soon Darken broke it, "Will we ever meet again?"

"I'm afraid.. probably not. I sure hope we do. It's been nice to know you, Darken," Thistle looked sad now.

"It's.. been nice to know you too... You-You were a good mentor to me," Darken was on the verge of wailing in protest. He hated this. At that moment, all he wanted to do was be with his family. His family! Finally, he would see them again. Darken was comforted for a small amount of time. That was when Thistle spoke the last word he ever did to the dark tabby, "Farewell."

"Farewell, Thistle.." Darken felt pain stab his heart. It was if thorns jabbed into it. He watched as the tom, his former mentor, padded away. Thistle's head was lowered; he was glaring at his paws. He stood still, as if his paws held him in place. He was frozen. Darken did not want to leave. Joining BloodClan, fighting with them, going hungry, it had all been for nothing. The only positive result was meeting his friends and learning battle strategies. But he would never need to fight again. And he would never see his BloodClan friends again, either. Now that they were going separate ways, they would not be living in the forest because the Clans would own it. Eventually, when all BloodClan cats had gone, and the Clan cats

were leaving to return to their camps, Darken began to leave too. He made his way out of Clan territory and went around towards his home.

Chapter Seventeen

Chilly wind blew throughout the hollow, ruffling Darken's ragged and dirty fur. Blood still stained his pelt, making it stick to his skin. As he went along, he realized he needed to clean himself. When the tabby came upon a stream, he touched his paw to it. It was frigid cold. *This won't be very pleasant.* Darken hesitantly lowered more of his body into the stream, flinching at the extremely cold temperature. Winter was arriving, so it was no wonder that it would be very cold. He had never been in water, however. It was his first experience. The dark tom waded into the stream, the clear water lapping against his legs. As he lowered even further, blood began to wash away and go downstream. He stepped out of the stream eagerly, only to be hit with even colder air. Because he got into the water, the air felt about ten times colder it seemed. Darken glanced down, noticing some blood had already dried and was still clinging to his fur. He began to run his tongue along the dried blood, cringing at the taste. It was necessary to clean himself though. Darken stopped when he removed most of the blood, looking up at the dark and cloudy sky. *We lost. We really lost. After everything...* As those thoughts set in, the tabby sighed and lowered his head in defeat. *Was it worth it?* Darken thought of the answer, but he couldn't bring himself to answer it. He didn't know.

Continuing his long trek to his home, he found comfort. *I will see my family and Snowy.* A huge gust of wind blew violently against him. *I really want to get home now!* Hurrying, Darken padded along with a quickened pace. He passed by several trees, and glancing over, he saw the city he had called home for a long while. Darken stopped momentarily to look; he would probably never be there again. *Goodbye BloodClan.* He went along, just above the hill sloping down to the fence that led to the entrance of the city. Darken made sure to stay far away from Clan territory; the last thing he needed was another fight with a Clan cat over a border dispute. He shivered, his pelt plastering to his frail body. The dark tabby kept on going, and eventually he reached a white picket fence. *Good, I'm nearer to home.* Darken turned right and kept going. He was passing by all of

the kittypet homes. *I'll have to watch for my own home now... I sure don't want to pass it and become lost. That'd be a disaster.* Thunder echoed in the distance. *A storm is coming...*

Crystal clear droplets of water began to fall from the sky. *And it's raining. I had better hurry up!* Darken ignored the pain in his shoulders and ran. *It has been so long.* The rain began to pour down. Mud formed in the ground. His fur was slicked against his frame; Darken felt as if he were frozen. He kept his gaze locked on each and every home, watching out for his own. His own home was white with a black roof. The fence, like most, was white, and there were two windows in the front. A door was in the middle with a kitty flap. It seemed like an eternity before homes seemed more familiar, and finally he recognized Snowy's home. Turning to look at the house just beside it, he saw his own. Darken's heart quickened. *My home! Oh, it's been moons! I'm here now! I'm finally here!* Quickly, he leaped on top of the fence and down onto the muddy, grassy ground. He ran as fast as his paws could carry him across the yard and into the kitty flap. Instantly, warmer air greeted Darken, and relief washed over him.

"Rose, Flint, Stream! I'm home! I'm here!" he yowled. Looking around, a sense of nostalgia came over him. *I miss this so much. It was boring, but how could I ever want to leave? I will never leave again!* His owner entered the room, looking at Darken with a shocked expression, "Stripes! You're back!" It took him a moment to register what she meant. *Stripes - it has been forever since I heard that name. I suppose my name is Stripes now? I'm not sure. Will I keep Darken as my name? I like it... I feel it suits me. I want to keep it in honor of being in BloodClan and the friends I met - Aurora and Thistle especially.* He ran over to his owner, rubbing her leg with a purr. Moments later, his family came running into the room, all equally as shocked. "Here, Stripes," she said, "I'll get you some food! You look as if you're starving! Oh, where did you go off to?" With that, she quickly exited the room.

"Stripes?!" Rose called.

"I'm here... I have a lot of explaining to do-" Darken began.

"Where were you?!" his mother demanded. "We all have been

worried sick about you! Yes, you better sit right there and explain to us where exactly you've been for so long! We thought you were dead! It'd be no surprise if a fox had come and gotten you. After all, you went outside all the time!" She spoke fast.

"Okay-Okay, I'll explain! I know... it, it was not a good idea for me to run off and leave all of you like that-"

"Let me guess, you just thought it was too boring here to stand it!" Stream intervened.

"You are in deep trouble," Flint's eyes narrowed, "As Stream told us, you have wanted to leave because it was simply too boring to live here."

"Look, just let me explain! I'm so sorry for leaving like that. It was wrong to worry you... but I had to leave-"

"Leave for what?! You didn't have to leave!" Rose said.

"I was outside when I saw two toms-"

"Here Stripes! Fresh food and water," his owner announced as she poured it into his old bowls. Although hungry as his mouth watered, he didn't go over to his bowls. He needed to explain. His owner walked over and stroked him a few times, "Aw, Stripes. Why did you go off like that?" After petting him for a few more moments, she walked off again.

"Now, go on," Flint said expectantly.

Darken continued on with his story, "They wanted me to join their Clan to defeat the Clan cats ruling over the forest. They needed recruits. I didn't want to turn them down because I wanted action in my life! A purpose... Their Clan was BloodClan-"

"What?!" Rose's eyes widened. "You fought with wild cats!"

"I did. I fought against the Clans. The alley cats needed land that was abundant in prey. They needed it to live. Besides, Clan cats are evil! They nearly killed Scourge- He was my leader. I also am named Darken now."

"I-I, I can't believe this! You changed your name?! You left us to fight?!" Rose yowled.

"I can't believe my son would do such a thing!" Flint growled. "How dare you abandon us?! What kind of cat are you?.."

"Stripes, you've taken it too far!" Stream cried. "Did you actually kill cats?"

"I..I.." Darken shrunk back, fear and sadness in his eyes. He didn't expect this to happen at all. "I did.. I did for a reason though... I thought you'd be proud of-"

"Proud!" Rose shrieked. "How are we proud of you?! Why would we be?! You killed another cat! You actually... You murdered!"

"No- It's not like that. I promise you!-"

"You bloodthirsty killer! You *monster*! I'm ashamed to call you my son!" Rose continued.

Tears came to Darken's eyes and he wailed, "No! I'm.. I didn't kill because- I just, I did it for a reason! I helped a group of starving, helpless cats-"

"Leave! Just leave!" Rose shook her head, distraught.

"Get out of here!" Flint added.

"You're apparently too bored to live here," Stream looked angry, "Just go then! Live with those mangy fleabags! Live in starvation!"

"But... no! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! Being there made me realize how gifted I really was. I became appreciative of what I have! I guess I wasn't grateful. But I sure am now! I need to stay here! I love all of you!" Darken's voice wavered. His heart was beating fast. How could his family make him leave? Did they care for him at all? All of the shouting and accusations made him feel sick inside. At that moment, all Darken wanted to do was lay in front of a cozy fire, bundled up beside his sister like they always had done.

"You've changed, Stripes," Rose was very upset, "You're a killer

and... and we can never forgive you. A cat like you deserves no home!"

"..But I.. I'm sorry," Darken could hardly speak. He choked on tears, "I didn't mean for any of this to happen-"

"Neither did we. We didn't want to raise a murderous son, but apparently you have turned out to be one. I can't believe you, Stripes... or whatever your name is now! Whatever you want to call yourself. It doesn't matter now. You haven't got a home here. You'll never be welcome."

"Just get out of our sight," Flint lowered his head, "I don't want you in our home any longer."

Darken stood frozen still, shock flooding his senses. Each of their faces held sadness, but their words were unforgiving and hurtful to him.

"I don't understand," the tabby murmured, "Why..."

"We once loved you," Rose answered, "and we still do! But you have chosen a different path and direction in life, and you have changed. It makes me sick to my stomach. You even went as far as changing your name. You think we don't care? We absolutely do. But you have killed! Do you even realize what you've done?! You have taken the life of another cat. You have turned into a monster!"

"And all while we were here, worrying and distressed," Flint was shaking his head, "Now do what I said. Leave."

"Goodbye, Stripes," Stream frowned, "We'll miss the cat you once were."

Darken was petrified, but he saw no solution to the situation. What could be done? His life was over, it seemed. What would happen now? Where would he go? With no reply, the tabby stood and began to pad towards the kitty flap, tail drooping and head down. Pain pierced his heart worse than he had felt before. This hurt him worse than when Aurora tragically died, yet he said nothing. There was nothing to say.

Chapter Eighteen

When he stepped out of the kitty flap, returning to the frigid cold weather, Darken made his way across the yard. Wind violently tore through the area, whipping branches of trees. The scrawny tabby leapt atop the white picket fence, giving a last sad glance at his old home. He sighed and looked away, jumping back down onto the grass on the other side. *Wait, I forgot about Snowy! I could stay in his home, perhaps?* Darken padded away from the house, towards Snowy's, before leaping over into the white tom's yard. *I will have so much to tell him.* He strode across the muddy yard, scratching at the door eagerly, "Snowy! Snowy, where are you?"

The only noises heard were the winds of the storm and thunder still distantly echoing.

Darken pawed at the door, desperately trying to gain his best friend's attention. Surely Snowy would never do what his family did. He and Snowy understood each other. Scratching and hitting at the door, Darken still did not earn a response. He stood silently, and then decided to go through the kitty flap. He went inside. A dark, gloomy ambiance greeted him. No one seemed to be home, "Snowy! Is anyone here?!" Still, nothing stirred within the home. Dust particles floated around in the empty space. It was barren and dull, once full of liveliness. Darken took a paw step forth, looking around frantically. *Where is he? Where did he go? What happened here?*

There was a crash outside. Darken jolted in sudden fear and whipped around. *What was that...? It came from outside. Snowy?* He remained still, finally gaining the courage to walk outside. A black tom with a white muzzle, chest, paws, and tail tip was seen, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. His ears were shredded, and he had bedraggled fur like Darken, "Who are you? What do you want? Why are you here?" The tom spat.

Darken glared at the unknown cat, eyes narrowing, "I should ask you those questions. Why are you in Snowy's yard?"

The black tomcat's ears twitched, "Snowy? Who's he?" Hostility remained in his expression, and he spoke quickly.

"He lives here," Darken replied, "Now why are you in his yard?"

"I live here," the tom corrected hastily, "No one's around here except me, and I plan to keep it that way. You ain't welcome here."

"No! My best friend lived here with his owners. Now where is he? What did you do to him?!" Darken demanded, voice rising. He was getting angry and wanted answers.

"Shut your muzzle," the tom rolled his eyes, "You must be referring to whoever lived here before, but they moved a while back. I took the opportunity to live here. Free shelter. Anyway, I ain't gonna share with you, so get lost! I own this place now, so don't think you can stay. I'll put up a fight with you."

Darken barely believed what he heard. Snowy was gone? Would he really move away without him? He couldn't blame Snowy for leaving. After all, he had gone without explanation, and if Snowy had stayed, he would lose his owners. But nonetheless, the news was heartbreaking. His one and only last friend, his best friend, was gone. How would he see him again?

"Where is Snowy now?" Darken ignored the threats.

"How am I supposed to know? I haven't gotta clue, so don't ask me! Where'd you even come from?" the tom retorted.

"I was a kittypet," Darken lowered his head, "And this was my best friend's home."

The black tomcat was not sympathetic, "Well get out. He's long gone now. This is my territory, and if you don't leave in the next moment or so I'll shred you, you hear?"

Darken padded away from the tom, giving him a glance. His eyes were narrowed, but he said nothing. The tabby leaped over the fence and felt nothing but grief. He had lost everything dear to him and everything that held purpose. That's what he had gone searching for, yet he lost it completely. His family rejected him, he

lost the battle, his friends met in BloodClan would never be seen again, and his best friend was gone. The wind still blew, and Darken's fur was blown every which way. He went on, barely able to pick his paws off of the ground. He was so exhausted. Making his way towards a tree, he curled up beneath it and lay. The wind sounded eerie. Lightning struck, appearing as thin claw marks against the sky, thunder booming moments later. The rain still poured; the storm showed no sign of stopping. The raindrops continued to hit Darken even though he was under a tall oak. The tabby buried his face in his paws, quickly falling asleep.

As the sun rose and dawn approached, the storm had ceased. What remained was wet, marshy, muddy ground. Darken awoke, his eyes opening as he got to his paws and stretched. He removed the wrapped leaf from his neck, placing it aside. It was no longer needed. The bleeding had completely stopped, but it was still sore. The dark tom wished that the events of yesterday hadn't happened. They did, though. He really had been rejected by his loved ones. They just didn't understand! If only they could.... It hurt knowing they didn't want him around. Darken sighed and gazed across the area; he was very hungry now. Good, fresh, juicy prey sounded great right then. He scented the air, and he caught the smell of cat. Sudden realization and alarm pulsed through him. He had spent the night on Clan territory without a moment's thought. Quickly, the tom got away until he could not pick up any trace of cat, and he was scenting the air again. *What if they had found me? They'd kill me without hesitation!*

Darken sighed, having no luck in finding prey. He tried again in various locations, and finally he caught the faint whiff of... something unidentifiable. Despite not knowing exactly what it was, he crouched down and recalled what Thistle taught him about hunting. Following the smell of prey, he went forward slowly, very cautious. This was a chance for food, and he certainly did not want to miss it. The creature that he was smelling came into view. The animal was brown and furry with a peculiar tail that was very bushy. It seemed to be searching for something. *I've got you.* Darken's claws slid out, and he advanced towards the strange animal, pawstep by pawstep. When in leaping range, he sprang at it, claws sinking into the creature. Nipping its throat, the furry prey

was dead within a matter of heartbeats. Hungrily, Darken tore into the meat, finding it surprisingly very good and fresh. He savored the meat, swallowing appreciatively of the tasty prey. *That was amazing. I wonder what those animals are called...*

When he finished and swiped his tongue around his jaws, Darken stood and looked around. He was once again reminded of Snowy and his disappearance. Grief clouded his thoughts, but he shook them away. *I must find somewhere, but where do I go? The Clans would live just beside me and possibly kill me. I'm not accepted with my family anymore. Snowy's gone. How am I to survive? Could I live as a loner, like Thistle before he joined BloodClan? Would it be hard?* Then an idea hit him - the alley. Darken could live there, and surely being the only cat to reside in that alley, prey would be much more abundant. No starvation like before. He decided he would do that. Maybe he'd meet a few cats there - who knew? The tabby gazed over the land, his eyes setting on his old home again. Solemnly, he looked over to Snowy's old residence too. It hurt to say goodbye to his home he had been raised in - the home Darken had during kithood. Turning away, he began walking. He was heading towards the city, passing by all of the homes and trees on the way. Chilly breezes accompanied him, wafting in the air. *Winter will be hard to manage.*

As Darken went on, he grew very thirsty. The first water source he came upon was a muddy puddle left over from the previous storm. It couldn't be worse than the puddles found in the city - the grimy, repulsive water. Living like this, Darken was accustomed to not having fresh food and water. He was simply grateful for any water to drink. Lowering and lapping at the brown puddle, he drank all of the water. Although contaminated, it quenched his thirst. What bad could mud do? Darken continued to pad off once done and kept walking. He went on in silence.

Chapter Nineteen

The sun was rising, yet the air remained chilly. It was cold enough to give Darken discomfort. As he shivered, the tabby dragged his paws along solemnly, eyes downcast. He could not stop thinking about what had happened. Even as he walked, it was still hard to fathom. Reality began to painfully set in; he'd never see his family again, and all because they just couldn't understand. Part of him was bitterly angry at Rose, Flint, and Stream. The other half of him he felt in his heart - loneliness and hurt. Although they had ridden of him, and despite them never wanting to see Darken again, he could not bring himself to hate them. He was raised by his parents, and the peaceful days he had with his sister... if only he had just one day like that again. *I guess I do understand their viewpoint.. in a way. They think I'm a murderer. But I'm not... I am not a murderous, bloodthirsty monster as they think! I did this for a reason. I fought for a reason. I just wanted adventure, for once in my life! And my happiness is gone. Maybe forever.*

It was very painfully the dreaded truth.
It hurt to even begin to think that his family really did reject him. And the fact Snowy left with his humans... Darken never explained why he left. *He probably thinks I'm dead. He still does not know. He doesn't know I returned, either.*

Was it worth it?

Even then, he could not answer himself. He didn't want to know the answer, so he pushed it away to the back of his mind.

Darken had been completely lost in thought; he did not realize that he was nearing the end of the neighborhood. Just a few houses ahead was the sloping hill that led down to the metal fence.
Once he passed the final house, Darken gazed back. His icy blue eyes were intently focused on all of the houses. He was staring. And he found that he was, once again, losing himself to thought.

Shaking his head, Darken turned back around. *I may never see my*

old neighborhood again. I don't think I'd ever have the strength to even travel back and see. It would be a reminder. But then again, the alley would be too. It'd be a reminder of his time in BloodClan. A time when he was naive and young. A time when he had no idea of what was to come.

Everything was just emotionally painful.

Darken thought back to Aurora. Images that were instilled in his memory were brought back to life. Darken again saw the life drain from the she-cat's eyes. Immediately, his teeth gritted, and he flinched. He stopped in his tracks. *I miss her. I miss Thistle, too. But Aurora. We shared the same background. We related on levels I never had with another cat. We were good friends. We trained hard together. We shared the same values. If only...*
If only she hadn't died. Oh, it would be so much better. Maybe then, I would not be in so much pain. Maybe then...
..Maybe then Aurora and I would have become mates.

Darken let out a long sigh, and then he looked forward. What lay in front of him was the city - what he would once again call home. He went forth and then down the steep decline. Then Darken had to pad forward a bit until he finally reached the fence. He jumped up, holding on to it as he climbed. The dark tabby leaped down, now on the other side. A more unpleasant scent greeted him, one he had gotten accustomed to as a BloodClan cat - the acrid stench of pollution, smog, and exhaustion; those were terms he learned of from Scourge. Now, the scent was present. It was because he had gotten used to the fresh forest scent.

Darken made his way to the road he was forced to run across to arrive at the alley. He quickly sprinted across the road when all was clear. Stopping at the opposing side of the street, the tom began walking again. He didn't even look up at the humans' faces as he passed by.

Then an unknown voice spoke up, that of a female's, "Awh, you poor little thing. It's starving! Oh, just look at that skinny cat. It's wearing a torn up collar! How strange is that?"

Another voice, this time a male's, replied, "It's a stray. Either that or

his owners neglected him. You don't know... that thing might be carrying diseases. Just stay away from it."

"But, I wish I could give him food.."

The rest of the conversation was not heard as Darken left earshot of the two humans. He looked up. *Now I should be getting close to the alley. I should watch for it.*

As Darken passed an alley, he stopped and observed. Yes, this was the alley that BloodClan stayed in. He could tell as soon as he saw it. And still, the faint smell of BloodClan remained. The tabby tom walked in. It was strange to see the alley so empty and quiet. It was never like this while in BloodClan. Darken reached the place he had slept. Nostalgia washed over his senses. Moons and moons before, he had arrived in that very spot for the first time. He lay down on the concrete.
What now? What do I do now that I'm here?

Faintly, the cars roaring by on the road could be heard; however, that was the only noise. Everything else was completely silent. Darken lowered his head, still in pain from the fight.
I suppose this is just it. There is nothing to do. The tabby exhaled sharply, tucking his paws under his chest to preserve warmth. *I don't see how this situation will get better. It seems there is no solution..*

A gust of cold wind blew fiercely throughout the alley, a few stray leaves being carried along with it. He shivered, feeling frozen solid.
And this cold weather will only continue to get worse.
For a few moments, all Darken could do was reflect upon prior events. And he felt like a helpless kit again, and he longed to run back to his family and stay with them. He realized he had taken his old life for granted; really, he hadn't known how good he had it. The cats living in the alley were starving, some on the brink of death.
Darken traded away his life for this one - all because he seeked adventure and purpose.

Was it really worth it?

Still, he did not know. Or maybe Darken did, but he ignored it and

shoved it to the back of his mind like before. The truth hurt.
The tom glanced around. No cat was in sight.
I'm alone. I'm so alone! Am I alone now, forever?

Chapter Twenty

Familiar hunger was felt, and a growl-like noise emitted from Darken's belly. It had been a few sunrises since Darken had returned to the alley. Rats had begun to appear more, at least since BloodClan left the same alley. However, they were still uncommon. Compared to the forest and Clan territory, prey there was scarce. He sighed outwardly, laying on the concrete. His head rested over his paws. *I wonder how a Clan cat would react if they were brought here. Do they know the city even exists?* Darken shut his eyes, dreaming about what life could have been if only BloodClan had won. *We would've successfully driven the Clan cats out and taken the forest as our own.* It was still painful to remember Aurora's death, but Darken knew he'd always remember - not that he wanted to forget. He'd always keep the she-cat in his memory, and his heart. *My family simply won't ever understand. I can't change their minds, nor can I convince them to allow me to return. I have to make do with this life.*

The dark tabby rose to his paws, sitting upright. He began to groom his tangled fur. It took strength to admit that he would never get anywhere complaining and laying around. *I may never forget painful parts of my life, but I can live on.* He gazed across the alley. *And I will.* Darken stood and scented the air, walking around in the alley to pick up anything at all. Finally, he did catch a scent of rat. He lowered and padded after the rat scent. Darken murmured quietly, the words merely a whisper, "Thistle, you taught me well." He knew he'd catch this one. His claws slid out, and the tom leaped out at the rat which was lurking in the shadows of the alley. Darken pinned the rat down and bit it quickly. He picked it up and carried it over to his usual spot. The rat was rather scrawny, but that thought didn't even cross his mind. He gladly tore into the meat. A cold breeze tugged at his fur. He sat again, his tail wrapping over his paws to provide warmth. When he finished, he padded behind a dumpster as to shelter him from the chilly winds which were increasing pace.

Being alone for this long with nothing to do allowed Darken to

think often. He thought back to moments of battle. Those thoughts actually comforted him. He knew that all those hungry cats were determined, like him. Every BloodClan cat bravely faced the enemy, minus the traitors who fled from sight. But he specifically recalled the moment the ginger Clan tomcat was seemingly killed by Scourge. Then a memory hit him like a ton of bricks. Thistle had told Darken about traditional Clan beliefs - StarClan. They had believed in the 'nonsense' that it was, and how leaders received nine lives supposedly. If leaders had nine lives, then they came back to life. And if the ginger tom was a leader, then he must have had nine lives.

Darken's eyes widened. He hadn't realized this at all, but it all fell into place. 'StarClan' beliefs debunked the reason why the tom had come back to life. *He really had! The tom had died all along! And he did come back to life!* And with 'StarClan' guiding their paws into battle, that's possibly why they won. After Scourge died, every single cat left. It was like they had never been determined to win at all. Darken could hardly believe it. The thoughts rushed through his head. He asked himself the question he never thought he would. *Is StarClan real?* As much as he wanted to argue back against the obvious truth, he didn't. StarClan was real. It had to be, for that tom to come back to life. Darken knew he had died. He had witnessed the life drain from the cat's eyes. His eyes trailed down to his paws. The reality hit him hard, and it hurt. *Just when I was thinking of ways life could get any worse. Well, I didn't see this coming.*

After several long moments, Darken began to shake his head. *StarClan's real.*

"I was fighting for the wrong side!" he wailed out, his eyes shut tight. He nearly choked. Darken raced out from behind the dumpster, glancing around frantically. "All this time, I thought I was doing right. I was doing wrong! Oh, what a fool I've been!"

He spoke again, particularly to no one at all but to himself, "I wanted purpose. I wanted adventure. I wanted a great life, but I sacrificed everything I ever loved! And for what? Nothing! I fought on the wrong side!"